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# Insights from the Bin Laden Archive

Inventory of research and knowledge and  
initial assessment and characterisation  
of the Bin Laden Archive

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# Preface

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In 2017, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) disclosed approximately 470,000 files recovered in Abbottabad (Pakistan) during the 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound ('the Bin Laden Archive'). According to data provided by the CIA, the Bin Laden Archive comprises a wide array of original files from devices collected during the Abbottabad raid that are presumed to have belonged to Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the compound.

In December 2018, the Research and Documentation Centre (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*, WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (*Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid*) commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a study (WODC Project Number: 2995) aiming to:

1. Produce an inventory of current knowledge on Al Qa'ida and of completed and ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive (Phase I); and
2. Conduct an initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive (Phase II).

The overarching objective of this study was to provide WODC with insights into the extent to which the Bin Laden Archive may provide new information about the ideology, organisation and strategy of Al Qa'ida; and about the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism and the threat that this poses for the West in general, and the Netherlands in particular. This report presents the activities and results of the study.

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## Executive Summary

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### This study provides an overview of the current knowledge on Al Qa'ida and an initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive

In 2017, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) disclosed approximately 470,000 files recovered in Abbottabad (Pakistan) during the 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound ('the Bin Laden Archive').<sup>1</sup> According to data provided by the CIA on its website,<sup>2</sup> the Bin Laden Archive ('the Archive' henceforth) comprises a wide array of original files from devices collected during the Abbottabad raid that are presumed to have belonged to Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the compound he lived in. Files included in the Archive include (clustered according to file type and content):

- More than 72,000 image files accounting for approximately 7 GB of data;
- More than 18,000 text files accounting for approximately 16 GB of data;<sup>3</sup>
- More than 24,000 Microsoft Offices files converted into PDF format, accounting for approximately 12 GB of data;
- More than 11,000 audio files accounting for approximately 30 GB of data; and
- More than 10,000 video files accounting for approximately 162 GB of data.

Despite the potential insights that this Archive stands to offer, limited research into its data and materials has been published to date in the public domain. More broadly, publicly available research conducted so far has entailed a qualitative review of only a selected number of files and documents. In December 2018, the Research and Documentation Centre (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*, WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (*Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid*) commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a study (WODC Project Number: 2995) aiming to:

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, L. (2012) 'The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Security Measures.' *CTC Sentinel* 5 (5).

<sup>2</sup> For further information please see Central Intelligence Agency (2017) 'November 2017 Release of Abbottabad Compound Material.' As of 3 July 2020: <https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> This includes a mix of Microsoft Word and PDF files.

Phase I of the study focused on conducting a literature review and interviews with experts on the study topics. It also entailed a Phase II feasibility assessment, to assess the extent to which the methods and approaches identified during the project planning stage could be employed in Phase II.

Phase II of the study focused on undertaking human-based and machine-based analysis of the different file types comprising the Archive, namely image, audio, video and text files, as well as the so-called Bin Laden journal - a handwritten journal included in the Archive that was reportedly written by Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the Abbottabad Compound.

Both Phases sought to answer a set of research questions, which are presented in Table S.1 alongside the project phase in which they were primarily addressed.

**Table S.1 Study research questions for Phases I–II**

|    | Research questions                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Study phase |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
|    | What is the state-of-the-art understanding as discerned from academic and grey literature of:                                                                                                                             |             |
| 1a | Al Qai'da's ideology and motives                                                                                                                                                                                          | I           |
| 1b | Al Qai'da's organisation, including its relations with external branches and affiliated groups                                                                                                                            | I           |
| 1c | Al Qai'da' strategy, tactics and modus operandi including as regards political, military, and propaganda activities                                                                                                       | I           |
| 1d | The phenomenon of <i>Jihadi</i> terrorism                                                                                                                                                                                 | I           |
| 2a | What research efforts have been conducted or are ongoing to analyse the Bin Laden Archive?                                                                                                                                | I           |
| 2b | To what extent have these efforts exhausted the potential for insights and findings to be generated through an analysis of Bin Laden Archive data and files?                                                              | I           |
| 2c | Would it be feasible to apply the proposed Phase II research methods on data included in the Bin Laden Archive?                                                                                                           | I           |
| 3  | How can data and files included in the Bin Laden Archive be characterised, categorised and clustered?                                                                                                                     | II          |
| 4a | To what extent can different clusters and subsets of the Bin Laden Archive yield relevant insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation, and strategy?                                                                   | II          |
| 4b | To what extent can clusters and subsets of the Bin Laden Archive offer relevant insights on the phenomenon of <i>Jihadi</i> terrorism and the threat this poses to the West in general and the Netherlands in particular? | II          |

## The study mapped out the existing knowledge regarding Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory, ideology, strategy and organisation

Al Qa'ida's ideology is based on Salafism, however the importance of the group's ideology should not be overstated

Al Qa'ida's ideology revolves around the concept of *Jihad* and is characterised by a strong anti-US and anti-Western sentiment. The key ideological elements and principles undergirding Al Qa'ida have reportedly remained stable throughout the years. However, a number of nuances and conflicting views can be observed within the Salafi Jihadist movement itself and within the organisation that have had practical implications for the ways in which Al Qa'ida has structured itself throughout the years as an organisation; and in the ways in which it has operated in different contexts and areas of operations.

In addition to elements of Salafi thought, Al Qa'ida's ideology draws upon selected parts of Islamic scholarship and traditions to build narratives and rhetoric reaching into long-standing and deeply held views and grievances among Muslim communities. Furthermore, the group is seen as building on the teachings of several scholars whose works and writings are used to provide legitimacy in the eyes of potential supporters and recruits.

Finally, scholars focusing on Al Qa'ida and other Jihadist groups also emphasise the importance of not overstating Al Qa'ida's ideological basis and coherence given the tendency that this and other *Jihadist* groups have to adjust theological and ideological arguments (i) to fit operational realities and needs, rather than the other way around; and (ii) in light of changing context, needs, and surviving members and scholars active in the organisation.

## Al Qa'ida has evolved significantly since the early 2000s moving towards a decentralised, networked and global movement

Al Qa'ida was established in the 1980s in Afghanistan by Osama Bin Laden and a close cohort of battle-hardened jihadists who had originally fought the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, forming what was initially a strongly hierarchical organisation. Al Qa'ida's core leadership has been based in Afghanistan and in the areas formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 led to a critical erosion and destruction of Al Qa'ida's physical infrastructure and organisational capacity.

Within the literature, there appears to be a general consensus that Al Qa'ida's organisation has evolved significantly since the early 2000s, moving from being a single, centralised entity to a more decentralised, networked and global movement. In particular, literature reviewed suggests a strong consensus for conceptualising Al Qa'ida's organisational structure as comprising of a central core and of a global network of affiliate groups connected to the core by different relations and arrangements.

In this regard, a number of debates have been identified within the literature regarding, for example, the level of control that Al Qa'ida Central exerts over its affiliates, and the extent to which the formal command and control structure linking Al Qa'ida Central and its affiliates has remained effective following the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011. Political instability and uprisings occurring throughout the Greater Middle East region from 2011 onward offered opportunities for Al Qa'ida and like-minded organisations to exploit



power vacuums and political transition periods to establish stronger footholds and presence. In Syria, an unprecedented internal split emerged between Al Qa'ida Central and the leadership of the Islamic State. This ultimately led to the Islamic State's separation from Al Qa'ida.

The existing literature captures the development and transformation of Al Qa'ida's organisation; while discrepancies exist in some places, there is wide consensus on the organisation's historical trajectory. Many sources view this transformation to have been borne out of necessity (due to losses incurred and a changing strategic environment), whilst others view it as part of a deliberate long-term strategy for ensuring the organisation's global reach.

### No clear consensus exists among scholars concerning Al Qa'ida's strategic timelines and short-to-medium term objectives

Within the literature, scholars have formulated different approaches to analysing and conceptualising Al Qa'ida's strategy. Overall, some consensus emerges from the literature around the overarching goals and objectives which include: awakening consciences and inspiring Muslims across the world to join *Jihad*; targeting apostate regimes across the Muslim world and leading to their downfall; confronting Western countries and their allies to weaken their standing and solidity; and, re-establishing a global Caliphate and achieving final victory. Most notably, however, documents retrieved from Al Qa'ida so far, and data available in the public domain, do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which different strategic objectives and goals are prioritised and pursued by the group.

Available literature on Al Qa'ida's strategy also reveals a tension within the group's approach to prioritising targets for the 'near' and 'far' enemies. Some sources provide empirical evidence suggesting that in recent years, Al Qa'ida has been mainly focused on operations against the so-called near enemy and that its strategy has shifted towards localised goals and population-centric approaches, rather than high-profile attacks designed to instil fear in the so-called far enemy. Other scholars suggest that the line between these two targeting approaches has become increasingly blurred in the 21st century as Al Qa'ida and other *Jihadist* groups have begun to attack both near and far enemies in conjunction with and dependent on opportunities.

As regards other strategic enablers and aspects of Al Qa'ida's strategic and operational work:

- Training camps have played a significant role in the history of the organisation, and particularly during its early years leading to the formation of a cadre of members and supporters. Limited information is available about current Al Qa'ida's training practices and facilities and these appear to be primarily the concern of local and regional chapters, rather than an element of Al Qa'ida Central's work.
- Propaganda has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role for Al Qa'ida, facilitating the recruitment of Jihadists across the globe and boosting the organisation's ranks.
- Limited conclusive information is available with regard to the role of women in Al Qa'ida. The available sources of primary data suggest that women are expected to support and encourage their husbands in pursuit of jihad and raise their children to fight for the same cause in the future.



Prior to the emergence of the Islamic State, Al Qa'ida was an unrivalled dominant actor in the global *jihadi* movement

Since its inception, Al Qa'ida has transformed from a small, relatively unknown and regionally focused organisation, to a global organisation with a quasi-monopoly over the Jihadist space, and then to one that is faced by a competitor, the Islamic State, which has proven more effective in generating resources, recruiting and inspiring fighters and uniting affiliates through the use of technology.

The literature reviewed over the course of Phase I indicates that the context in which Al Qa'ida as an organisation operates has changed drastically from its early years. In connection to discussions of Al Qa'ida's global influence relative to that of the Islamic State, many sources reflect on the organisation's changing structure and relations with its affiliates and its struggles to ensure that the wider *Jihadist* movement continues to pursue a coherent strategic direction overseen by Al Qa'ida's leadership.

Looking at the present context, the literature reveals disagreements among scholars regarding the extent and nature of Al Qa'ida's relative decline since the emergence of the Islamic State. Some hold that since its establishment, the Islamic State has made rapid progress in dismantling Al Qa'ida's leadership of the global *jihadi* movement and has thus come to dominate the ideological and strategic space. Others suggest that the core organisation and wider network of Al Qa'ida have remained resilient and its 'brand appeal' continues to resonate with and influence extremist groups worldwide.

### The Bin Laden Archive represents a resource of partially untapped potential

The study team conducted a systematic search for publications and research focusing on Bin Laden Archive data. The majority of publications identified made only limited or passing references acknowledging the existence of the Bin Laden Archive, but did not conduct any analysis of its data. In six instances,<sup>4</sup> the study team identified relevant publications which were further reviewed due to their having data included in the Archive. In all such instances, research conducted on data included in the Bin Laden Archive and on the Bin Laden Bookshelf, a previous, incomplete release of the Archive, entailed a qualitative review of a limited sample of files and documents. Overall, the small number of articles and publications identified, combined with the methodological limitations of endeavours undertaken so far on the Bin Laden Archive, suggest that there is significant scope for further research and analysis of these data.

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<sup>4</sup> Lahoud, N., S. Caudill, L. Collins, G. Koehler-Derrick, D. Ressler & M. al-'Ubaydi (2012) 'Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?' *Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint*; Collins, L. (2012) 'The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Security Measures.' *CTC Sentinel* 5 (5); Roggio, B. (2017) 'Analysis: CIA releases massive trove of Osama bin Laden's files.' *The Long War Journal*; Gartenstein-Ross, D. and N. Barr (2018) 'How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design.' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 23: 66–138; Grace, E. (2018). 'A dangerous science: psychology in Al Qaeda's words.' *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11(1): 61–71; Grace (2018) 'Lex talionis in the twenty-first century: revenge ideation and terrorism.' *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 10(3): 249–263.

## The study sought to characterise the Bin Laden Archive

File types were used as the characteristics around which to build macro clusters of the Archive to further investigate and characterise

A total of four clusters were identified: images, audio, video, and text. The study team adopted a sample-based analysis approach for the image, audio and video clusters that leveraged stratified samples to ensure that different file types and sub-clusters would be considered in the work. As for the text cluster, the study team adopted a machine-enabled approach to conduct a mapping and characterisation of the entirety of text files available, as well as a qualitative analysis of the ‘Bin Laden journal’, a handwritten journal included in the Archive that was reportedly written by Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the Abbottabad Compound.

The image sample categorised over the course of Phase II activities suggests that the image cluster might have limited relevance to the study objectives. Two exceptions are worth highlighting. First, within the image cluster, a subset of images appears to originate from devices in use in the Archive, or from individuals who then shared photos and images with the compound inhabitants. However, these images appear to be of limited relevance in the context of the study due to their focus primarily on children, animals and the spaces and landscapes in and around the compound, rather than topics connected to the study. Second, a number of handwritten and printed letters and documents appear as scans within the image cluster. However, a review of the letters and documents included in the sample did not yield significant novel insights relevant to the study.

A qualitative review of audio transcripts generated under the study indicate that the majority of audio files included in the Phase II sample focus on religious topics, although not exclusively or predominantly from an extremist perspective. Recitations of the Qur’an, anasheed, lessons and sermons are particularly prevalent across all sample strata. More broadly, all of the recordings included in the study sample appear to be public and non-sensitive or private in their content; this also applies to a sizable proportion of randomly selected files excluded from the study sample due to the exclusion criteria employed.

A qualitative review of video transcripts generated under the study – as well as a review of a second sample of videos in their original format – indicate that the majority of video files included in Phase II samples focus on topics connected to religion and terrorism. This does not include, however, several videos that touch on topics or originate from sources that led to their exclusion from the study sample. In that regard, it is worth noting that a wide array of television broadcasts, cartoons and other non-relevant materials were identified during the preparation of the study video samples.

A machine-enabled corpus linguistics analysis of the texts included in the Archive led to the identification of clear patterns within the available data. In particular, the RAND-Lex<sup>5</sup> analysis of the Archive’s text cluster led to the identification of four categories of content:

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<sup>5</sup> RAND-Lex is a proprietary suite of analytic tools developed by RAND researchers to perform rigorous and complex text analytics and machine learning.

- First, a sizable segment of the text clusters was comprised of files that were edited by the CIA, as well as corrupt and unreadable files.
- Second, a number of text clusters identified in the Archive were comprised of newspapers copies, as well as copies of individual online articles and media publications from different periods of time.
- Third, a number of clusters identified in the text analysis were comprised of publications of different nature, covering religious themes and topics. This group of clusters includes both pedagogical materials, as well as publications covering advanced notions and topics within Islamic jurisprudence and theology.
- Fourth, a number of clusters that were identified comprised of documents covering issues related to jihadism, terrorism, extremism, politics and international affairs. Most interestingly, these clusters were comprised of public sources and documents downloaded from a wide range of websites and sources, but also documents that appear to be either of a confidential nature, or to have originated and been authored directly by occupants of the compound, or by individuals living in hiding who had been in contact with them.

A qualitative review and analysis of the Bin Laden journal highlights a number of themes discussed in the document with the main being on the developing situation across Arab countries during the so-called Arab Spring. Particularly in the first half of the journal, the entries are focused on detailing the latest developments of political turmoil across different countries in the Middle East and North Africa region,. The journal also suggested that Bin Laden was considering thinking about ‘public relations’ activities and creating content for wider release in response to the Arab Spring, including developing a recorded statement. The journal also touches on wider ideological, strategic and organisational aspects of Al Qa’ida at the time at which it was written, although these are not the focus, and do not provide much additional information to what already known and discussed in existing academic literature.

The text cluster is the one most likely to yield relevant insights on Al Qa’ida’s ideology, organisation and strategy and on the broader phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism

The image, audio and video clusters appear to have only a limited potential to help generate new knowledge and insights on Al Qa’ida and on the related phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism. The text cluster of the Archive appears to be the most promising cluster that could help generate novel insights and knowledge about Al Qa’ida. This is due to the cluster being comprised of personal, sensitive and private documents authored by individuals living in the Abbottabad compound or by other Al Qa’ida senior personnel living in hiding and in contact with those in the compound.

Little to no materials were found that had a specific relevance or reference to the Netherlands

The material with a connection to the Netherlands includes a picture of a former Member of the European Parliament at a time at which this individual was still an MEP. The image was captured from what appears to be a televised programme or interview. There was also a website banner with Dutch text about board games. Neither of these items were deemed to be of relevance.

## The files within the text cluster should be further characterised and prioritised in future in-depth studies on the Bin Laden Archive

Based on the findings gathered in the initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive, the study team holds the view that analysing selected clusters and subsets of the Archive could generate novel insights and knowledge through access to primary sources so far not considered in scholarly literature. In particular, the study team recommends prioritising an in-depth analysis of selected segments of the text cluster. While, as noted above, there is material of interest in other clusters (notably the handwritten letters within the image cluster, and certain elements of the videos cluster), the overall proportion of potential material of interest within these clusters appears to be lower than that of the text cluster.

Furthermore, and in light of possible time and resource constraints that need to be taken account when conducting future studies on the Bin Laden Archive, clustering the text files would enable researchers to prioritise files of interest, and conduct a more in-depth analysis of the most relevant files in an efficient and time effective manner.

### Dit onderzoek biedt een overzicht van de huidige inzichten over Al Qa'ida en een eerste analyse en categorisering van het 'Bin Laden-archief'

In 2017 openbaarde de Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) van de Verenigde Staten (VS) ongeveer 470.000 bestanden die waren gevonden tijdens de inval in de woning van Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad (Pakistan) in 2011, het zogenaamde 'Bin Laden-archief'.<sup>6</sup> Volgens de gegevens op de website van de CIA<sup>7</sup> bestaat het Bin Laden-archief (hierna 'het archief') uit een uitgebreide verzameling van originele bestanden afkomstig van apparaten die zijn meegenomen tijdens de inval in Abbottabad en die verondersteld worden te zijn geweest van Osama Bin Laden en andere bewoners van de woning. Het archief bevat de volgende bestanden (gesorteerd op bestandstype en inhoud):

- Meer dan 72.000 afbeeldingen, ongeveer 7 GB aan data;
- Meer dan 18.000 tekstbestanden, ongeveer 16 GB aan data;<sup>8</sup>
- Meer dan 24.000 Microsoft Office bestanden in PDF formaat, ongeveer 12 GB aan data;
- Meer dan 11.000 geluidsbestanden, ongeveer 30 GB aan data; en
- Meer dan 10.000 videobestanden, ongeveer 162 GB aan data.

Ondanks dat het archief mogelijk nieuwe inzichten kan bieden, is er tot nu toe weinig onderzoek naar de data en bestanden gepubliceerd in het publieke domein. Tot op heden bestaan dergelijke openbare studies voornamelijk uit kwalitatief onderzoek naar een beperkt aantal bestanden en documenten. In december 2018 gaf het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum (WODC) van het Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid de opdracht aan RAND Europe om een onderzoek uit te voeren met het doel:

1. Een inventarisatie van de huidige kennis over Al Qa'ida en van afgerond en lopend onderzoek naar het Bin Laden-archief (Fase I) te maken; en
2. Een eerste analyse en categorisering van het Bin Laden-archief te maken (Fase II).

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<sup>6</sup> Collins, L. (2012) 'The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Security Measures.' *CTC Sentinel* 5 (5).

<sup>7</sup> Voor meer informatie, zie Central Intelligence Agency (2017) 'November 2017 Release of Abbottabad Compound Material.' As of 3 July 2020: <https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> Dit bestaat uit een Microsoft Word en PDF bestanden.

Fase I van het onderzoek bestond uit literatuuronderzoek en interviews met experts op dit onderwerp. Daarnaast bestond het uit een haalbaarheidsonderzoek voor Fase II om te bepalen in hoeverre de methoden en aanpak die tijdens de planning van het project waren opgesteld, gebruikt zouden kunnen worden voor Fase II.

Fase II van het onderzoek richtte zich op een handmatige en computergestuurde analyse van de verschillende typen bestanden in het archief, namelijk beeld-, audio-, video- en tekstbestanden, en op het zogenaamde Bin Laden dagboek – een handgeschreven dagboek in het archief dat naar verluidt is geschreven door Osama Bin Laden en andere bewoners van het huis in Abbottabad.

Het doel van beide fasen van het onderzoek was om de onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden. Deze worden getoond in Tabel S.1 samen met de (voornaamste) onderzoeksfase waarin zij werden behandeld.

**Tabel S.1 Onderzoeksvragen voor Fase I-II**

| Onderzoeksvragen                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Onderzoeksfase |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Wat zijn de huidige inzichten in de academische en grijze literatuur met betrekking tot: |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                |
| 1a                                                                                       | De ideologie en drijfveren van Al Qa'ida                                                                                                                                                                                             | I              |
| 1b                                                                                       | De organisatie van Al Qa'ida, waaronder de relaties met externe groeperingen en geaffilieerde groepen                                                                                                                                | I              |
| 1c                                                                                       | Al Qa'ida's strategie, tactiek en modus operandi, waaronder politieke, militaire en propaganda activiteiten                                                                                                                          | I              |
| 1d                                                                                       | Het fenomeen <i>jihadistisch</i> terrorisme                                                                                                                                                                                          | I              |
| 2a                                                                                       | Welke onderzoeken over het Bin Laden-archief zijn afgerond of worden momenteel uitgevoerd?                                                                                                                                           | I              |
| 2b                                                                                       | In hoeverre hebben dergelijke inspanningen reeds de mogelijkheden voor het analyseren van het Bin Laden-archief benut om tot nieuwe inzichten en bevindingen te komen?                                                               | I              |
| 2c                                                                                       | Is het haalbaar om de voorgestelde onderzoeksmethoden van Fase II te gebruiken voor de analyse van de data in het Bin Laden-archief?                                                                                                 | I              |
| 3                                                                                        | Hoe kunnen de data en bestanden in het Bin Laden-archief gelabeld, gecategoriseerd en gegroepeerd worden?                                                                                                                            | II             |
| 4a                                                                                       | In hoeverre kunnen de verschillende clusters en subgroepen van het Bin Laden-archief relevante inzichten opleveren over de ideologie, organisatie en strategie van Al Qa'ida?                                                        | II             |
| 4b                                                                                       | In hoeverre kunnen de clusters en subgroepen van het Bin Laden-archief relevante inzichten opleveren over <i>jihadistisch</i> terrorisme en de dreiging die dit vormt voor het Westen in het algemeen en Nederland in het bijzonder? | II             |

## Een inventarisatie van bestaande kennis over de geschiedenis, ideologie, strategie en organisatie van Al Qa'ida

De ideologie van Al Qa'ida is gebaseerd op het salafisme, maar het belang van de ideologie van de groep moet niet worden overschat

De ideologie van Al Qa'ida is gebaseerd op het concept *jihad* en kan gekarakteriseerd worden als een ideologie met een sterk anti-VS en anti-westers sentiment. De belangrijkste ideologische elementen en principes die ten grondslag liggen aan Al Qa'ida, zijn naar verluidt stabiel gebleven door de jaren heen. Desalniettemin kunnen er enkele nuances en tegenstrijdige opvattingen gevonden worden in de salafistische *jihadistische* beweging zelf en binnen Al Qa'ida die praktische gevolgen hebben gehad voor de manier waarop de organisatie zich georganiseerd heeft door de jaren heen en voor de manier waarop de groep opereert in verschillende contexten en gebieden.

Naast de elementen van het salafistisch gedachtegoed put de ideologie van Al Qa'ida ook uit bepaalde delen van de islamitische wetenschap en tradities om een verhaal en retoriek te ontwikkelen die refereren aan lang gekoesterde en diepgewortelde opvattingen en grieven onder de moslingemeenschap. Daarnaast baseert Al Qa'ida zich op inzichten van geleerden wiens werken gebruikt worden om de legitimiteit van de groep aan te tonen voor potentiële aanhangers en rekruten.

Ten slotte benadrukken experts die zijn gespecialiseerd in Al Qa'ida en andere *jihadistische* groepen ook dat het belangrijk is om de ideologische basis en samenhang van Al Qa'ida niet te overschatten, aangezien Al Qa'ida en andere *jihadistische* groeperingen hun theologische en ideologische argumenten aan moeten passen (i) om aan te sluiten op de operationele realiteit en behoeften (in plaats van andersom); en (ii) gezien de veranderende context, behoeften en overlevende leden en geleerden die actief zijn binnen de organisatie.

**Al Qa'ida is sinds begin 2000 aanzienlijk veranderd en is steeds meer een gedecentraliseerd netwerk en mondiale beweging geworden**

Al Qa'ida werd opgericht in de jaren '80 in Afghanistan door Osama Bin Laden en een hechte groep door de strijd geharde *jihadisten* die oorspronkelijk vochten tegen de Sovjet-invasie in Afghanistan. Zij vormden een organisatie die in eerste instantie sterk hiërarchisch was. De kern van het leiderschap van Al Qa'ida was gevestigd in Afghanistan en in de gebieden die oorspronkelijk bekend waren als de Federaal Bestuurde Stamgebieden (FBS) van Pakistan. De invasie van de VS in Afghanistan in 2001 resulteerde in een afbrokkeling en vernietiging van de fysieke infrastructuur en organisatorische capaciteit van Al Qa'ida.

In de wetenschappelijke literatuur lijkt men het erover eens te zijn dat Al Qa'ida aanzienlijk is veranderd sinds begin 2000, waarbij het beeld verschoof van één gecentraliseerde groep naar een meer gedecentraliseerde netwerkorganisatie en een mondiale beweging. De literatuur wijst in het bijzonder op een sterke consensus dat de organisatorische structuur van Al Qa'ida gezien kan worden als een centrale kern met een wereldwijd netwerk van geaffilieerde groepen die verschillende relaties en afspraken hebben met de kern.

In dit opzicht zijn er verschillende discussies te onderscheiden in de literatuur over bijvoorbeeld de mate van controle die Al Qa'ida's kern over de geaffilieerde groepen heeft en in hoeverre de formele controlestructuur tussen Al Qa'ida's kern en de geaffilieerde groepen is blijven bestaan sinds de dood van Osama



Bin Laden in 2011. Politieke instabiliteit en opstanden in het Midden-Oosten en de regio eromheen boden sinds 2011 mogelijkheden voor Al Qa'ida en gelijkgestemde organisaties om het machtsvacuüm en de politieke overgangsperioden te gebruiken om meer invloed en een sterkere aanwezigheid te verwerven. In Syrië ontstond een ongekennde interne wrijving tussen Al Qa'ida's kern en de leiders van Islamitische Staat, hetgeen uiteindelijk leidde tot het afsplitsen van Islamitische Staat van Al Qa'ida.

De beschikbare literatuur laat de ontwikkeling en transformatie van de organisatie van Al Qa'ida zien: hoewel er bepaalde verschillen van inzicht bestaan, is er een brede consensus over het historische traject van de organisatie. Veel bronnen geven aan dat deze transformatie uit noodzaak is geboren (als gevolg van de geleden verliezen en veranderende strategische omgeving), terwijl anderen het zien als een onderdeel van een weloverwogen langetermijnstrategie gericht op het waarborgen van de mondiale reikwijdte van de organisatie.

### Er is geen duidelijke consensus onder experts over de strategische tijdlijnen en korte- tot langetermijndoelstellingen van Al Qa'ida

Deskundigen hebben in de literatuur verschillende benaderingen geformuleerd om de strategie van Al Qa'ida te analyseren en te conceptualiseren. Over het algemeen komt er enige overeenstemming naar voren uit de literatuur rondom de overkoepelende doelen en doelstellingen, waaronder: bewustwording creëren en moslims over de hele wereld inspireren om zich bij de *jihad* aan te sluiten; afvallige regimes in de moslimwereld aanvallen om hun ondergang te veroorzaken; de confrontatie aangaan met Westerse landen en hun bondgenoten om hun positie en solidariteit te verzwakken; en een wereldwijd kalifaat tot stand brengen en de uiteindelijke overwinning behalen. Het is echter opvallend dat de documenten die tot nu toe bij Al Qa'ida gevonden zijn en publiek toegankelijke informatie geen grondig inzicht bieden in de manier waarop de strategische doelstellingen worden geprioriteerd of nagestreefd door de groep.

De beschikbare literatuur over de strategie van Al Qa'ida toont aan dat het stellen van prioriteiten voor het aanvallen van 'nabije' en 'verre' vijanden op gespannen voet met elkaar staat. Sommige bronnen leveren empirisch bewijs dat suggereert dat Al Qa'ida zich in de afgelopen jaren voornamelijk richtte op operaties tegen de zogenoemde nabije vijand en dat hun strategie verschoof van grote spraakmakende aanvallen (gericht op angst zaaien bij de zogenoemde verre vijand) naar lokale doelen en bevolkingsgerichte aanpakken. Andere experts stellen dat de grens tussen deze twee benaderingen steeds vager is geworden in de 21<sup>ste</sup> eeuw nu Al Qa'ida en andere *jihadistische* groepen begonnen zijn met het tegelijkertijd en opportunistisch aanvallen van zowel nabije als verre vijanden.

Overige factoren die volgens de literatuur het strategische en operationele werk van Al Qa'ida faciliteren hebben betrekking op:

- Trainingskampen: deze hebben een belangrijke rol gespeeld in de geschiedenis van de organisatie, voornamelijk in de beginjaren, waardoor een basis van leden en sympathisanten is ontstaan. Over de huidige trainingspraktijken en faciliteiten van Al Qa'ida is beperkt informatie beschikbaar. Deze lijken voornamelijk van belang voor lokale en regionale afdelingen en lijken minder onderdeel te zijn van de activiteiten van Al Qa'ida's kern.
- Propaganda: dit speelde en speelt een belangrijke rol voor Al Qa'ida doordat het de werving van *jihadisten* van over de hele wereld faciliteert en de gelederen van de organisatie versterkt.

- De rol van vrouwen: er is beperkt informatie beschikbaar over de rol van vrouwen in Al Qa'ida. De beschikbare bronnen met primaire data geven aan dat van vrouwen verwacht wordt dat zij hun echtgenoot steunen en aanmoedigen de *jihad* na te jagen en hun kinderen opvoeden om in de toekomst voor hetzelfde doel te vechten.

## Voor de opkomst van Islamitische Staat was Al Qa'ida de meest dominante speler in de wereldwijde *jihadistische* beweging

Bij oprichting was Al Qa'ida een kleine, relatief onbekende en regionaal georiënteerde groepering. Sindsdien transformeerde Al Qa'ida zich eerst tot een wereldwijde organisatie met een quasi-monopolistische positie binnen het *jihadistische* gedachtegoed en vervolgens tot een organisatie die geconfronteerd wordt met een concurrent, Islamitische Staat. Deze concurrerende organisatie bleek effectiever in het genereren van middelen, het rekruteren en inspireren van strijders en het verenigen van gelieerde groepen met behulp van technologie.

De literatuur die tijdens Fase I is onderzocht geeft aan dat de context waarin Al Qa'ida als organisatie opereert, drastisch is veranderd sinds de beginjaren.

De literatuur toont dat er verschillende opvattingen bestaan tussen experts met betrekking tot de omvang en de aard van de tanende positie van Al Qa'ida sinds de opkomst van Islamitische Staat. Sommigen zijn van mening dat Islamitische Staat sinds zijn oprichting snelle vooruitgang heeft geboekt bij het ontmantelen van het leiderschap van Al Qa'ida over de wereldwijde *jihadistische* beweging en daardoor de ideologische en strategische ruimte is gaan domineren. Anderen suggereren dat de kern van Al Qa'ida en het bredere netwerk van Al Qa'ida veerkrachtig zijn gebleven en dat de 'aantrekkingskracht van het merk' blijft resoneren met en invloed heeft op extremistische groepen over de hele wereld.

## Het Bin Laden-archief is een bron met gedeeltelijk onbenut potentieel

Het onderzoeksteam zocht systematisch naar publicaties over en onderzoek naar de gegevens in het Bin Laden-archief. De meerderheid van de geïdentificeerde publicaties verwees slechts in beperkte mate naar het bestaan van het Bin Laden-archief, zonder de data te analyseren. Het onderzoeksteam vond zes publicaties<sup>9</sup> die verder werden onderzocht omdat ze gegevens van het archief analyseerden. In al die gevallen bestond het onderzoek naar de gegevens uit het Bin Laden-archief en de Bin Laden Boekenplank – een eerdere, onvolledige uitgave van het archief – uit een kwalitatieve analyse met een beperkte steekproef van bestanden en documenten. Al met al suggereert het beperkte aantal gevonden artikelen en publicaties

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<sup>9</sup> Lahoud, N., S. Caudill, L. Collins, G. Koehler-Derrick, D. Ressler & M. al-'Ubaydi (2012) 'Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?' Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint; Collins, L. (2012) 'The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Security Measures.' *CTC Sentinel* 5 (5); Roggio, B. (2017) 'Analysis: CIA releases massive trove of Osama bin Laden's files.' *The Long War Journal*; Gartenstein-Ross, D. and N. Barr (2018) 'How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design.' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 23: 66–138; Grace, E. (2018). 'A dangerous science: psychology in Al Qaeda's words.' *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11(1): 61–71; Grace (2018) 'Lex talionis in the twenty-first century: revenge ideation and terrorism.' *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 10(3): 249–263.

gecombineerd met de methodologische beperkingen van de uitgevoerde onderzoeken naar het Bin Laden-archief dat er nog veel mogelijkheden zijn voor verder onderzoek en verdere analyse van de gegevens.

## Het onderzoek heeft de gegevens uit het Bin Laden-archief ingedeeld in categorieën

De bestandstypen werden gebruikt als categorieën waaromheen macroclusters van het archief gebouwd kunnen worden voor verder onderzoek en categorisering

In totaal werden er vier clusters geïdentificeerd: afbeeldingen, audio, video en tekst. Het onderzoeksteam gebruikte een analytische benadering met een steekproef voor de afbeelding-, audio- en videoclusters wat resulteerde in gestratificeerde steekproeven zodat de verschillende typen bestanden en sub-clusters meegenomen zouden worden in het onderzoek.

Voor het tekstcluster gebruikte het onderzoeksteam een geautomatiseerde aanpak om alle beschikbare tekstbestanden in kaart te brengen en te categoriseren en een handmatige analyse van het 'Bin Laden dagboek'.

De steekproef met afbeeldingen die tijdens Fase II werden gecategoriseerd, suggereert dat het afbeeldingscluster mogelijk beperkte relevantie heeft voor de doelstellingen van het project. Twee uitzonderingen zijn het vermelden waard. Ten eerste lijkt in het afbeeldingscluster een subgroep van afbeeldingen afkomstig te zijn van apparaten die in de woning in Abbottabad werden gebruikt of van individuen die foto's en afbeeldingen deelden met de bewoners. Echter, deze afbeeldingen zijn van beperkte relevantie voor het onderzoek aangezien ze voornamelijk kinderen, dieren, ruimtes en landschappen in en rondom de woning bevatten, in plaats van op de onderwerpen die verband houden met de studie. Ten tweede verschijnt een aantal handgeschreven en afgedrukte brieven en documenten als scans in het afbeeldingscluster. Een inventarisatie van deze brieven en documenten in de steekproef leverde echter geen nieuwe inzichten op die relevant waren voor het onderzoek.

Uit een kwalitatieve analyse van de audio transcripten die gegenereerd zijn tijdens het onderzoek, blijkt dat de meeste audiobestanden in de steekproef van Fase II gericht zijn op religieuze onderwerpen, maar niet uitsluitend of overwegend vanuit een extremistisch perspectief. In de strata van de steekproef komen voornamelijk recitaties uit de Koran, *anasheed*, lessen en preken voor. Over het algemeen lijkt de inhoud van alle opnames in de steekproef openbaar en niet-vertrouwelijk of privé. Dit geldt ook voor een aanzienlijk deel van de willekeurig geselecteerde bestanden die vanwege de gehanteerde uitsluitingscriteria niet in de steekproef zaten.

Uit een kwalitatieve analyse van de video transcripten die gemaakt zijn tijdens het onderzoek evenals uit een analyse van een tweede steekproef van video's in hun oorspronkelijke bestandsformaat blijkt dat de meeste videobestanden in de steekproef van Fase II gericht zijn op onderwerpen die verband houden met religie en terrorisme. Dit geldt echter niet voor enkele video's die uitgesloten werden van de steekproef op basis van de onderwerpen waar ze betrekking op hadden of vanwege de bronnen waaruit ze afkomstig waren. Het is hierbij belangrijk om te vermelden dat een breed scala aan televisie-uitzendingen, cartoons en ander niet-relevante inhoud werd geïdentificeerd tijdens de voorbereiding van de videosteekproef voor het onderzoek.

Een machine-gestuurde corpuslinguïstische analyse van de teksten in het archief leidde tot de identificatie van duidelijke patronen binnen de beschikbare gegevens. Met name de RAND-Lex<sup>10</sup> analyse van het tekstcluster in het archief resulteerde in de identificatie van vier informatiecategorieën:

- Ten eerste bestond een groot deel van de tekstclusters uit bestanden die door de CIA zijn bewerkt, evenals uit beschadigde en onleesbare bestanden.
- Ten tweede bestond een aantal tekstclusters in het archief uit kopieën van kranten en kopieën van losse online artikelen en persberichten uit verschillende perioden.
- Ten derde bestond een aantal clusters in de tekstanalyse uit verschillende publicaties over religieuze thema's en onderwerpen. Deze clusters bevatten zowel pedagogisch materiaal als publicaties over complexe concepten en onderwerpen van islamitische jurisprudentie en theologie.
- Ten vierde bestond een aantal clusters uit documenten over onderwerpen gerelateerd aan *jihadisme*, terrorisme, extremisme, politiek en internationale betrekkingen. Het meest interessante is dat deze clusters bestonden uit openbare bronnen en documenten afkomstig van een scala aan websites en bronnen, maar ook uit documenten die ofwel van vertrouwelijke aard lijken ofwel rechtstreeks afkomstig lijken te zijn van (en geschreven lijken door) bewoners van de woning in Abbottabad of door ondergedoken personen die met hen in contact zijn geweest.

Een kwalitatieve analyse van het dagboek van Bin Laden toont een aantal terugkerende thema's die in het document worden besproken. De belangrijkste daarvan is de ontwikkeling van de situatie in de Arabische landen tijdens de zogenaamde Arabische Lente. Met name in de eerste helft van het dagboek zijn de aantekeningen gericht op het beschrijven van de laatste ontwikkelingen met betrekking tot de politieke onrust in verschillende landen in het Midden-Oosten en Noord-Afrika. Het dagboek suggereert ook dat Bin Laden overwoog om 'voorlichtingsactiviteiten en informatie' in te gaan zetten in reactie op de Arabische Lente, waaronder het ontwikkelen van een opgenomen verklaring.

Het dagboek gaat ook in op bredere ideologische, strategische en organisatorische aspecten van Al Qa'ida op het moment dat het werd geschreven. Deze onderwerpen zijn echter niet de focus van het dagboek en bieden ook weinig nieuwe inzichten ten opzichte van wat al bekend en besproken is in de bestaande academische literatuur.

Het tekstcluster levert waarschijnlijk de meest relevante inzichten op over de ideologie, organisatie en strategie van Al Qa'ida en over het bredere fenomeen *jihadistisch terrorisme*

De afbeeldings-, audio- en videoclusters lijken slechts een beperkt potentieel te hebben om nieuwe kennis en inzichten over Al Qa'ida en het gerelateerde fenomeen *jihadistisch* terrorisme te genereren. Het tekstcluster van het archief lijkt het meest veelbelovende cluster dat kan helpen om nieuwe inzichten en kennis over Al Qa'ida op te doen. Dit komt doordat het cluster bestaat uit persoonlijke, gevoelige en privé

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<sup>10</sup> RAND-Lex is een gepatenteerd softwarepakket van analytische tools die zijn ontwikkeld door onderzoekers van RAND om zorgvuldige en complexe tekstanalyses met behulp van *machine learning* uit te voeren.

documenten die gemaakt zijn door personen die leefden in de woning in Abbottabad of door ander ondergedoken hooggeplaatst Al Qa'ida personeel dat in contact was met de mensen in de woning.

Er is weinig tot geen materiaal gevonden dat specifiek relevant is voor of verwijst naar Nederland

Het materiaal dat te relateren is aan Nederland, bestaat uit een foto van een voormalig lid van het Europees Parlement, gemaakt toen deze nog een Europarlementariër was. De afbeelding is waarschijnlijk gemaakt in het kader van een televisieprogramma of een interview. Er was ook een websitebanner met Nederlandse tekst over bordspellen. Het onderzoeksteam achtte geen van deze informatie-items relevant.

## De bestanden in het tekstcluster moeten verder gecategoriseerd worden en geprioriteerd worden in toekomstige verdiepende onderzoeken naar het Bin Laden-archief

Op basis van de bevindingen van de eerste analyse en categorisering van het Bin Laden-archief is het onderzoeksteam van mening dat het analyseren van bepaalde clusters en subsets van het archief nieuwe inzichten en kennis kan genereren vanwege de toegang tot primaire bronnen die tot dusverre nog niet in de wetenschappelijke literatuur zijn geanalyseerd. Het onderzoeksteam beveelt specifiek aan om prioriteit te geven aan een verdiepende analyse van geselecteerde onderdelen van het tekstcluster. Hoewel andere clusters potentieel relevante informatie bevatten (met name de handgeschreven brieven in het afbeeldingscluster en bepaalde elementen in het videoccluster), lijkt de totale hoeveelheid potentieel relevante inhoud in deze clusters kleiner dan in het tekstcluster.

Het categoriseren van tekstbestanden in het Bin Laden archief kan – rekening houdend met mogelijke beperkingen van de beschikbare tijd en middelen – onderzoekers in de gelegenheid bieden om prioriteit te geven aan interessante bestanden. Op deze manier zouden diepgaandere analyses naar de meest relevante bestanden efficiënter uitgevoerd kunnen worden.

# Table of contents

---

|                                                                                               |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Preface .....                                                                                 | iii       |
| Executive Summary.....                                                                        | v         |
| Samenvatting .....                                                                            | xiii      |
| Figures .....                                                                                 | xxiv      |
| Tables .....                                                                                  | xxv       |
| Boxes .....                                                                                   | xxviii    |
| Abbreviations .....                                                                           | xxix      |
| Acknowledgements.....                                                                         | xxxi      |
| <b>1. Introduction.....</b>                                                                   | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1. Study rationale.....                                                                     | 1         |
| 1.2. Scope, objectives and research questions .....                                           | 2         |
| 1.3. Methodology .....                                                                        | 3         |
| 1.4. Document purpose and outline .....                                                       | 8         |
| <b>2. Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory.....</b>                                              | <b>11</b> |
| 2.1. Al Qa'ida's foundation and the build-up to the 9/11 attacks .....                        | 11        |
| 2.2. Organisational decline and resurgence on the global stage and in the Iraqi context ..... | 13        |
| 2.3. Al Qa'ida's adaptation and evolution through regional chapters.....                      | 14        |
| 2.4. Al Qa'ida after the Arab Spring and the death of Bin Laden.....                          | 15        |
| 2.5. Islamic extremist terrorism in the Netherlands .....                                     | 18        |
| <b>3. Al Qa'ida's ideology .....</b>                                                          | <b>23</b> |
| 3.1. The ideological foundations of Al Qa'ida.....                                            | 23        |
| 3.2. Al Qa'ida's ideology beyond religious influences .....                                   | 28        |
| <b>4. Al Qa'ida's strategy .....</b>                                                          | <b>31</b> |
| 4.1. Strategic objectives.....                                                                | 31        |
| 4.2. Means and operations.....                                                                | 35        |
| 4.3. Targeting the near and the far enemy.....                                                | 37        |
| 4.4. Supporting elements and enablers.....                                                    | 38        |
| <b>5. Al Qa'ida's organisation .....</b>                                                      | <b>43</b> |

|                 |                                                                                          |            |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 5.1.            | Organisational approach from the organisation's foundation to the 9/11 attacks.....      | 43         |
| 5.2.            | Organisational changes following the US invasion of Afghanistan.....                     | 44         |
| 5.3.            | Implications of Al Qa'ida's networked approach.....                                      | 47         |
| 5.4.            | The influence of Al Qa'ida Central over other non-affiliated <i>Jihadist</i> groups..... | 56         |
| <b>6.</b>       | <b>Previous and ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive .....</b>                      | <b>59</b>  |
| 6.1.            | The untapped potential of the Bin Laden Archive.....                                     | 59         |
| <b>7.</b>       | <b>Image analysis.....</b>                                                               | <b>63</b>  |
| 7.1.            | Image analysis approach and limitations .....                                            | 63         |
| 7.2.            | Image sample analysis .....                                                              | 68         |
| 7.3.            | Summary and conclusions .....                                                            | 80         |
| <b>8.</b>       | <b>Audio analysis.....</b>                                                               | <b>83</b>  |
| 8.1.            | Audio analysis approach and limitations .....                                            | 83         |
| 8.2.            | Audio sample analysis .....                                                              | 86         |
| 8.3.            | Summary and conclusions .....                                                            | 88         |
| <b>9.</b>       | <b>Video analysis.....</b>                                                               | <b>89</b>  |
| 9.1.            | Video analysis approach and limitations.....                                             | 89         |
| 9.2.            | Video sample transcripts analysis .....                                                  | 96         |
| 9.3.            | Video sample analysis .....                                                              | 98         |
| 9.4.            | Summary and conclusions .....                                                            | 101        |
| <b>10.</b>      | <b>Text analysis.....</b>                                                                | <b>103</b> |
| 10.1.           | Overview of the research approach and limitations .....                                  | 103        |
| 10.2.           | Overview of text clusters identified and composition .....                               | 107        |
| 10.3.           | Summary and conclusions .....                                                            | 130        |
| <b>11.</b>      | <b>Bin Laden journal analysis.....</b>                                                   | <b>133</b> |
| 11.1.           | Journal overview .....                                                                   | 133        |
| 11.2.           | Journal themes and insights .....                                                        | 136        |
| 11.3.           | Summary and conclusions .....                                                            | 140        |
| <b>12.</b>      | <b>Conclusions.....</b>                                                                  | <b>141</b> |
| 12.1.           | Phase I research questions .....                                                         | 141        |
| 12.2.           | Phase II research questions.....                                                         | 146        |
| 12.3.           | Reflections and recommendations on areas for further research.....                       | 153        |
|                 | References .....                                                                         | 155        |
| <b>Annex A.</b> | <b>Phase I methodology .....</b>                                                         | <b>165</b> |
| A.1.            | Phase I: Production of the Al Qa'ida-related knowledge inventory.....                    | 165        |
| <b>Annex B.</b> | <b>Phase II methodology.....</b>                                                         | <b>171</b> |

|                 |                                                                                  |            |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| B.1.            | Phase II: Initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive ..... | 171        |
| <b>Annex C.</b> | <b>Stakeholder elicitation details and tools.....</b>                            | <b>175</b> |
| C.1.            | Interviewees list .....                                                          | 175        |
| C.2.            | Stakeholder interview protocol.....                                              | 176        |
| C.3.            | Stakeholder interview consent form .....                                         | 178        |



## Figures

---

|                                               |   |
|-----------------------------------------------|---|
| Figure 1.1 Phase I approach and methods ..... | 3 |
| Figure 1.2 Phase II approach and methods..... | 6 |

## Tables

---

|                                                                                                                             |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table S.1 Study research questions for Phases I–II .....                                                                    | vi  |
| Tabel S.1 Onderzoeksvragen voor Fase I-II .....                                                                             | xiv |
| Table 1.1 Study research questions for Phases I–II .....                                                                    | 2   |
| Table 1.2 High-level themes and topics against which Archive data was clustered and mapped under Phase II.....              | 4   |
| Table 1.3 Overview of Phase II methodology feasibility assessment steps and tasks.....                                      | 5   |
| Table 6.1 Overview of results by database and after review and filtering process .....                                      | 60  |
| Table 6.2 Qualitative review of selected samples of studies on files found in the Bin Laden archive .....                   | 61  |
| Table 7.8 Image duplication mapping.....                                                                                    | 71  |
| Table 8.1 Archive audio files distribution by length bands.....                                                             | 83  |
| Table 8.2 Audio cluster sample composition .....                                                                            | 84  |
| Table 8.3 Audio sample exclusion criteria.....                                                                              | 84  |
| Table 8.4 Template for recording audio files excluded from the study analysis sample.....                                   | 85  |
| Table 8.5 Overview of audio sample file number composition and of random files assessed to identify relevant materials..... | 85  |
| Table 8.6 Audio sample qualitative review template .....                                                                    | 86  |
| Table 9.1 Archive video files distribution by length bands.....                                                             | 89  |
| Table 9.2 Video cluster sample composition for transcription work.....                                                      | 90  |
| Table 9.3 Video sample exclusion criteria.....                                                                              | 91  |
| Table 9.4 Template for recording video files excluded from the study analysis sample.....                                   | 91  |
| Table 9.5 Overview of video sample file number composition and of random files assessed to identify relevant materials..... | 92  |
| Table 9.6 Video cluster sample composition for human review .....                                                           | 92  |
| Table 9.7 Overview of video sample file number composition and of random files assessed to identify relevant materials..... | 93  |
| Table 9.8 Video sample transcripts qualitative review template.....                                                         | 94  |
| Table 9.9 Extraction template for the human-based analysis of the second video sample .....                                 | 95  |

|                                                                                                                                                     |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table 10.1 Archive video files distribution by length bands .....                                                                                   | 103 |
| Table 10.2 RAND-Lex settings for text clustering analysis conducted .....                                                                           | 106 |
| Table 10.3 Analysis parameters employed for Text and Converted Microsoft Office files analysis .....                                                | 108 |
| Table 10.4 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                           | 108 |
| Table 10.5 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                           | 109 |
| Table 10.6 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                           | 109 |
| Table 10.7 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                           | 110 |
| Table 10.8 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                           | 111 |
| Table 10.9 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                           | 113 |
| Table 10.10 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 114 |
| Table 10.11 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 115 |
| Table 10.12 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 116 |
| Table 10.13 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 117 |
| Table 10.14 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 118 |
| Table 10.15 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 118 |
| Table 10.17 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 120 |
| Table 10.18 Analysis parameters employed for Text and Converted Microsoft Office files analysis .....                                               | 121 |
| Table 10.19 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 121 |
| Table 10.20 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 122 |
| Table 10.21 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 123 |
| Table 10.22 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 124 |
| Table 10.23 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 124 |
| Table 10.24 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 126 |
| Table 10.25 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 126 |
| Table 10.26 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 127 |
| Table 10.27 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 128 |
| Table 10.28 Overview of cluster data .....                                                                                                          | 129 |
| Table 10.29 Overview of the text clusters .....                                                                                                     | 130 |
| Table 12.1 Overview and summary of Phase II feasibility assessment results .....                                                                    | 144 |
| Table 12.2 High-level themes and topics to be potentially investigated during possible in-depth research on a selected cluster of the Archive ..... | 147 |
| Table 12.3 Potential for new insights and findings concerning Al Qa'ida to stem from further analysis on discreet clusters of the Archive .....     | 151 |

|                                                                                                                |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table A.1 Overview of search strings employed to identify publications touching on the Bin Laden Archive ..... | 166 |
| Table A.2 Databases and repositories searched to map publications touching on the Bin Laden Archive .....      | 166 |
| Table A.3 Overview of results by database and after review and filtering process.....                          | 166 |
| Table A.4 Literature inventory mapping template .....                                                          | 167 |
| Table A.5 Literature extraction registry .....                                                                 | 168 |
| Table C.1 Interviewees list .....                                                                              | 175 |

## Boxes

---

|                                                                                                                                 |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Box 2.1 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory and relevance to the Dutch context .....          | 21  |
| Box 3.1 Scholars and ideologues identified in the reviewed literature as influential over Al Qa'ida.....                        | 24  |
| Box 3.2 Key concepts of Islamic traditions and their understanding and interpretation in Al Qa'ida's ideology and thought ..... | 27  |
| Box 3.3 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's ideology.....                                                           | 29  |
| Box 4.1 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's strategy .....                                                          | 42  |
| Box 5.1 The Egyptian Islamic Jihad .....                                                                                        | 50  |
| Box 5.2 Al Qa'ida in Iraq .....                                                                                                 | 51  |
| Box 5.3 Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula.....                                                                                 | 52  |
| Box 5.4 Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb.....                                                                                   | 52  |
| Box 5.5 Al Shabaab .....                                                                                                        | 53  |
| Box 5.6 Jabhat al Nusra and Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham .....                                                                         | 53  |
| Box 5.7 Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent.....                                                                               | 54  |
| Box 5.8 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's organisation.....                                                       | 58  |
| Box 11.1 Brief summary of the main events relating to the start of the Arab Spring (2010–2011) .....                            | 134 |

## Abbreviations

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|       |                                                    |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------|
| AIVD  | Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations     |
| AQAP  | Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula                 |
| AQI   | Al Qa'ida in Iraq                                  |
| AQIM  | Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb                   |
| AQIS  | Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent               |
| ASCII | American Standard Code for Information Interchange |
| BBC   | British Broadcasting Corporation                   |
| CIA   | Central Intelligence Agency                        |
| CNN   | Cable News Network                                 |
| CTC   | Combating Terrorism Center                         |
| CTIRU | Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit           |
| EIJ   | Egyptian Islamic Jihad                             |
| FATA  | Federally Administered Tribal Areas                |
| FBI   | Federal Bureau of Investigation                    |
| GSPC  | Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat            |
| IPT   | Investigative Project on Terrorism                 |
| IS    | Islamic State                                      |
| ISI   | Inter-Services Intelligence                        |
| ISIL  | Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant               |
| ISIS  | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria                    |
| IT    | Information Technology                             |
| LDA   | Latent Dirichlet Allocation                        |
| MENA  | Middle East and North African                      |
| MEP   | Member of the European Parliament                  |

|          |                                                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| NCTV     | National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism                                          |
| OCR      | Optical character recognition                                                                   |
| RLP      | Religious Literacy Project                                                                      |
| SAC      | Scientific Advisory Committee                                                                   |
| SALW     | Small Arms and Light Weapons                                                                    |
| SVD      | Singular Value Decomposition                                                                    |
| TFIDF    | Term Frequency over Inverse Document Frequency                                                  |
| TWJ      | Tawhid wal-Jihad                                                                                |
| UK       | United Kingdom                                                                                  |
| UK CTIRU | United Kingdom Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit                                         |
| US       | United States                                                                                   |
| USB      | Universal Serial Bus                                                                            |
| USS      | United States Ship                                                                              |
| VLC      | VideoLAN Client                                                                                 |
| VM       | Virtual Machine                                                                                 |
| WODC     | Research and Documentation Centre ( <i>Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum</i> ) |

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# 1. Introduction

---

In 2017, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) disclosed approximately 470,000 files recovered in Abbottabad (Pakistan) during the 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound ('the Bin Laden Archive').<sup>11</sup> According to data provided by the CIA on its website,<sup>12</sup> the Bin Laden Archive ('the Archive' henceforth) comprises a wide array of original files from devices collected during the Abbottabad raid that are presumed to have belonged to Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the compound he lived in. Files in the Archive include (clustered according to file type and content):

- More than 72,000 image files accounting for approximately 7 GB of data;
- More than 18,000 text files accounting for approximately 16 GB of data;<sup>13</sup>
- More than 24,000 Microsoft Offices files converted into PDF format, accounting for approximately 12 GB of data;
- More than 11,000 audio files accounting for approximately 30 GB of data; and
- More than 10,000 video files accounting for approximately 162 GB of data.

Despite the potential insights that this Archive stands to offer, limited research into its data and materials has been published to date in the public domain. More broadly, publicly available research conducted so far has entailed a qualitative review of only a selected number of files and documents.

The archive therefore represents a partially untapped source of potential that could provide researchers with access to insights into under-researched areas relating to Al Qa'ida and its evolution and trajectory over the years. In particular, given the large volume of files included in the Archive, a systematic review employing scalable analytics and IT-enhanced research methods could provide opportunities to derive such insights. To date, however, no such review has been conducted and released into the public domain.

## 1.1. Study rationale

In December 2018, the Research and Documentation Centre (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*, WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (*Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid*) commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a study (WODC Project Number: 2995) aiming to:

---

<sup>11</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>12</sup> For further information please see CIA (2017).

<sup>13</sup> This includes a mix of Microsoft Word and PDF files.

1. Produce an inventory of current knowledge on Al Qa'ida and of completed and ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive (Phase I); and
2. Conduct an initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive (Phase II).

## 1.2. Scope, objectives and research questions

The overarching objective of this study was to provide WODC with insights into the extent to which the Bin Laden Archive may provide new information about the ideology, organisation, and strategy of Al Qa'ida; and about the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism and the threat that this poses for the West in general and the Netherlands in particular. To meet these objectives, the study sought to answer a set of research questions, which are presented in Table 1.1 alongside an indication of the project phase in which they were addressed.

**Table 1.1 Study research questions for Phases I–II**

|    | Research questions                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Study phase |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
|    | What is the state-of-the-art understanding – as discerned from academic and grey literature – of:                                                                                                                         |             |
| 1a | Al Qai'da's ideology and motives;                                                                                                                                                                                         | I           |
| 1b | Al Qai'da's organisation, including its relations with external branches and affiliated groups;                                                                                                                           | I           |
| 1c | Al Qai'da's strategy, tactics and modus operandi, including political, military and propaganda activities; and                                                                                                            | I           |
| 1d | The phenomenon of <i>Jihadi</i> terrorism?                                                                                                                                                                                | I           |
| 2a | What research efforts have been conducted or are ongoing to analyse the Bin Laden Archive?                                                                                                                                | I           |
| 2b | To what extent have these efforts exhausted the potential for insights and findings to be generated through an analysis of Bin Laden Archive data and files?                                                              | I           |
| 2c | Would it be feasible to apply the proposed Phase II research methods on data included in the Bin Laden Archive?                                                                                                           | I           |
| 3  | How can data and files included in the Bin Laden Archive be characterised, categorised and clustered?                                                                                                                     | II          |
| 4a | To what extent can different clusters and subsets of the Bin Laden Archive yield relevant insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy?                                                                    | II          |
| 4b | To what extent can clusters and subsets of the Bin Laden Archive offer relevant insights on the phenomenon of <i>Jihadi</i> terrorism and the threat this poses to the West in general and the Netherlands in particular? | II          |

### 1.3. Methodology

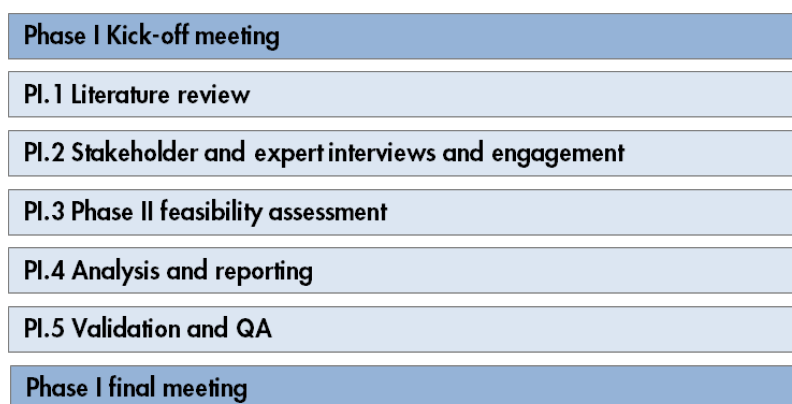
Phase I focused on producing an inventory of current knowledge on Al Qa'ida and of completed and ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive, while Phase II focused on providing an initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive. An overview of the methodology employed across both Phases is provided below, with the methodology described in greater detail in Annex A (Phase I) and Annex B (Phase II).

#### 1.3.1. Phase I: Production of the Al Qa'ida-related knowledge inventory

Figure 1.1 provides a visual overview of the activities that were implemented to pursue Phase I objectives, which were:

- To investigate and take stock of the state-of-the-art research and knowledge concerning Al Qa'ida's ideology, strategy and organisation, and the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism;
- To take stock of ongoing and completed research efforts focusing on and investigating the so-called Bin Laden Archive; and
- To conduct a high-level feasibility assessment of the methodology and approach proposed for Phase II of the study.

**Figure 1.1 Phase I approach and methods**



Source: RAND Europe

Additionally, over the course of Phase I of the study, the research team – in collaboration with WODC and the project Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) – identified a set of topics that the study could explore over the course of Phase II, based on a review of current scholarly knowledge and gaps on Al Qa'ida and the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. Table 1.2 provides an overview of these topics and links them to the relevant overarching project themes.

**Table 1.2 High-level themes and topics against which Archive data was clustered and mapped under Phase II**

| Research strand |                       | Topic to be investigated                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.              | Ideology              | • Influence of different scholars and contemporary thinkers on Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing.                                                                                                                    |
| 2.              | Ideology              | • Degree of coherence and cohesiveness of Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing approaches.                                                                                                                              |
| 3.              | Ideology/<br>Strategy | • Al Qa'ida leadership's perception and analysis of contemporary geopolitical developments, conflicts and ensuing opportunities.                                                                                    |
| 4.              | Strategy              | • Existence and content of an organisational medium- to long-term strategy. Degree of agency and reactivity influencing the design and adjustment of organisational strategies for medium- to long-term objectives. |
| 5.              | Strategy              | • Al Qa'ida's prioritisation and decision-making mechanisms concerning targeting and operational/tactical approaches.                                                                                               |
| 6.              | Strategy              | • Configuration, use and role of training camps administered by Al Qa'ida Central following US invasion of Afghanistan.                                                                                             |
| 7.              | Strategy              | • Envisioned role of women within Al Qa'ida.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 8.              | Organisation          | • Al Qa'ida's relations and engagements with state authorities and security services in Pakistan, Iran and other relevant theatres of operation.                                                                    |
| 9.              | Organisation          | • Drivers and factors influencing decision making around official affiliation to Al Qa'ida's brand of different groups and organisations across the globe.                                                          |
| 10.             | Organisation          | • Degree of oversight, command and control exercised by Al Qa'ida Central on affiliate groups and their operational planning.                                                                                       |
| 11.             | Organisation          | • Degree and drivers of autonomy for command and control exercised by affiliate groups vis-à-vis Al Qa'ida Central.                                                                                                 |
| 12.             | Organisation          | • Al Qa'ida's decision making approach to balancing global- and local-level strategic, operational and tactical issues.                                                                                             |

Phase I included conducting targeted searches on academic and grey publications related to Al Qa'ida and its ideology, strategy, and organisation, as well as on the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. It also employed systematic searches to identify sources and publications that focused on – or reviewed materials included in – the Bin Laden Archive. The study team also consulted with stakeholders and experts through semi-structured interviews and emails with four academic experts on Al Qa'ida and *Jihadi* terrorism. The study team then analysed and reported the findings in an internal Phase I report.

In addition, the study team undertook a Phase II feasibility assessment, to assess the extent to which it would be feasible to employ the methods and approaches identified for Phase II during the project-planning stage. To this end, the feasibility assessment entailed:

1. Downloading, cleaning and preparing Bin Laden Archive data for use in the context of the study and according to Phase II plans;
2. Testing all processes and work-flows envisioned under Phase II activities;
3. Identifying, assembling and testing the internal hardware and software architecture to be deployed for the conduct of Phase II work; and

4. Reviewing results obtained from feasibility assessment work and reporting to the SAC and WODC about any potential methodological adjustment required for consideration in case of Phase II contracting.

Table 1.3 below provides a step-by-step overview of the activities undertaken during the feasibility assessment task of Phase I.

**Table 1.3 Overview of Phase II methodology feasibility assessment steps and tasks**

| Step | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.   | Contact relevant national authorities to inform them about ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive and request advice on data storage, handling and distribution procedures (if necessary). |
| 2.   | Design internal data storage, handling and transfer processes compliant with relevant national legislation.                                                                                   |
| 3.   | Prepare and collect signed Bin Laden Archive access and project participation consent forms from research-team members and commence Bin Laden Archive handling work.                          |
| 4.   | Download, scan, clean and prepare a copy of the Bin Laden Archive hosted on a local machine to use for project activities.                                                                    |
| 5.   | Design, prepare and test internal software and hardware system architecture for conduct of Phase II activities.                                                                               |
| 6.   | Prepare randomised and non-randomised data samples for different file types to be used during Phase II data-manipulation activities.                                                          |
| 7.   | Upload full Bin Laden Archive text documents subset on RAND-Lex <sup>14</sup> and test RAND-Lex features proposed for use in Phase II text analytics work.                                    |
| 8.   | Test software for conversion into audio format of video files included in the Archive.                                                                                                        |
| 9.   | Test process for transfer, processing and receipt of transcribed audio files with external service provider.                                                                                  |
| 10.  | Test process for transfer, processing and receipt of processed image samples with external service provider.                                                                                  |
| 11.  | Test process for transfer, processing and receipt of analysis of video files with US-based researchers tasked with this activity.                                                             |
| 12.  | Explore costs associated with OCR processing of printed and handwritten documents in Arabic, and feasibility of their use as part of Phase II activities.                                     |
| 13.  | Review results of feasibility assessment work during Phase I internal validation workshop and, where necessary, critically assess and revise methodology proposed for Phase II of the study.  |
| 14.  | Report results and recommendations stemming from feasibility assessment work in <i>Phase I Summary Report</i> for SAC and WODC.                                                               |

### 1.3.2. Phase II: Initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive

Phase II activities sought to understand what materials are contained in the Archive and explore the extent to which they might be relevant to the subject matter of the study. Figure 1.2 illustrates the activities pertaining to Phase II, in accordance with the following objectives:

- To understand what materials are contained in the Archive and explore the extent to which they might be relevant to the subject matter of the study; and

<sup>14</sup> RAND-Lex is a proprietary suite of analytical tools developed by RAND researchers to perform rigorous and complex text analytics and machine learning.

- To determine the extent to which Archive materials might provide – upon conduct of an in-depth analysis and review during further research activities – new and relevant insights on Al Qa’ida and its ideology, organisation and strategy, as well as on the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism.

Figure 1.2 Phase II approach and methods

|                                       |
|---------------------------------------|
| Phase II Kick-off meeting             |
| Phase II.1 Image analysis             |
| Phase II.2 Audio analysis             |
| Phase II.3 Video analysis             |
| Phase II.4 Text analysis              |
| Phase II.5 Bin Laden journal analysis |
| Phase II.6 Analysis and reporting     |
| Phase II.7 Validation and QA          |
| Phase II Final meeting                |

As part of Phase II, the study team reviewed a sample of the different file types included within the Archive. An overview is provided below, with additional details in Annex B and the respective chapters corresponding to each type of analysis.

- **Image files:** the study team conducted a human-based analysis of a non-randomised sample of the images included in the Archive. The analysis entailed a review of the images included in the sample and their categorisation according to a predetermined set of tags. In total, the study team analysed 1,500 images, accounting for approximately 2 per cent of the whole image cluster of the Archive.
- **Audio files:** the study team conducted both a human- and a machine-based analysis of transcripts from a stratified random sample of the audio files included in the Archive. Stratified random sampling is a method of sampling that involves the division of a population into smaller sub-groups, known as strata, based on members’ shared attributes or characteristics. In total, the study team analysed 15 hours of audio files. The analysed files account for approximately 0.5 per cent of the whole audio cluster, while the total number of audio files sampled accounts for approximately 1.5 per cent of the whole audio cluster.
- **Video files:** the study team conducted both a human- and a machine-based analysis of transcripts of a stratified random sample of the video files included in the Archive. In total, the study team analysed 15 hours of video file transcripts. The files analysed as part of the transcript analysis account for just under 1 per cent of the whole video cluster. The total number of video files sampled accounts for just over 2 per cent of the whole video cluster.
- **Text files:** the study team employed RAND-Lex to analyse all text files in the Archive (over 42,000 files). RAND-Lex is a proprietary suite of analytical tools developed by RAND researchers to perform rigorous and complex corpus text analytics.

- **Bin-Laden journal:** the so-called ‘Bin Laden journal’ is a handwritten journal included in the Archive that was reportedly written by Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the Abbottabad Compound. The journal is available in the Archive as a scanned, handwritten document. The journal was transcribed through an external service provider and was then subject to both a human- and a machine-based analysis. The journal transcript was reviewed as a standalone document by the study team.

Following this analysis, the study team analysed and reported the findings in an internal Phase II report.

### 1.3.3. Limitations

A number of limitations should be noted from the research conducted. Additional detail on the limitations specific to the Phase II activities are provided in Chapters 6 to 10.

**Literature review.** In light of the timeframe and resource constraints of Phase I, the review of academic and grey literature was limited to a sample of available English language sources on the subjects of interest. Furthermore, it was not possible to adopt a systematic approach to the searching for, and identification of, relevant sources and literature. This was due not least to the wide array and volume of publications available on the subjects of interest. Instead, the study team employed a snowballing approach whereby additional studies and resources were identified through stakeholder and expert engagements and/or through previous studies and resources reviewed. As a result, this may have led to the exclusion of a subset of highly referenced studies and publications focusing on Al Qa’ida and other topics of interest to the study. Finally, the literature review presented in this report is comprised of – and reflects – publications that were available between January and May 2019.

**Archive significance and scope.** The Archive includes data and information concerning Al Qa’ida and *Jihadi* terrorism up until 2011, when the raid on Osama Bin Laden’s compound was conducted by US military forces. While an analysis of the Archive might yield some enduring insights, its nature is primarily that of an historical archive, providing potential insights into Al Qa’ida up until the year of Osama Bin Laden’s death. Assessing the extent of the connection between Al Qa’ida’s practices today and the periods to which Archive data refer was beyond the scope of the study. Nonetheless, Archive data might provide useful insights to validate, reject or expand current state-of-the-art knowledge on Al Qa’ida, and its impact on and relation to the phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism up until 2011.

**Expert consultations.** In light of the project’s timeframe and resource constraints, the study team’s engagement was limited to a small sample of subject matter experts with previous experience of work on Al Qa’ida. Consultations and engagements conducted were not intended to be representative of the landscape of scholars and practitioners engaged with Al Qa’ida and *Jihadi* terrorism-related studies. Rather, consultations and engagements were conducted with a view to validate and test emerging findings of Phase I literature review efforts, and to elicit information concerning completed and ongoing research efforts on the Bin Laden Archive.

**Data on non-public research efforts.** Data concerning ongoing and completed research on the Bin Laden Archive presented in Chapter 6 of this report refer to publicly available and disclosed publications and research efforts. In addition to conducting a systematic search for relevant literature (see Section 1.3.1), the study team contacted a number of relevant researchers and organisations to identify any ongoing work being



conducted on Bin Laden Archive data. Only a limited subset of researchers responded to such inquiries, suggesting that such research may exist or be ongoing in a classified or non-public setting. It should therefore be acknowledged that the state-of-the-art knowledge landscape presented in Chapter 6 does not account for non-public or classified research activities – either completed or ongoing – to which the study team were not granted access.

**Sampling.** In light of resource and time constraints, the analysis work conducted under Phase II of the project focused on only a limited sample of the image, audio and video cluster of the Archive. As such, the analysis and assessment of these clusters is inherently limited to a small subset of the available content. Similarly, while the text collection in the Archive has been assessed in its entirety through a machine-learning-enabled capability, the characterisation by human researchers could be conducted only on a subset of documents included in the Archive. As such, it is possible that relevant typologies of content in the different Archive clusters might not be represented in the samples considered, and might therefore not have surfaced in the analysis discussed in subsequent chapters. Nonetheless, the analysis presented offers relevant insights that might provide guidance to assist other researchers engaging with the Archive to prioritise their future efforts.

**Contextual knowledge of materials.** Over the course of Phase II activities, the study team endeavoured to assess whether content could be considered novel and potentially hitherto unknown to scholars, or whether it would have been available in the past in the public domain (e.g. as propaganda material accessible through online fora and outlets of *Jihadist* material). The lack of contextual information about files included in the Archive and the way in which these are currently available to researchers (e.g. with no information on folder compositions, storage structure, etc.) significantly limited the study team’s ability to draw conclusions as to the novelty of materials encountered. Overall, the study team considered that materials were unlikely to be novel if they contained propaganda material or speeches addressed to the general public in different countries and constituencies, or if they portrayed public events or gatherings held in identifiable public spaces. As for novel material, instances where the study team judged any material not to have been previously available in the public domain are noted throughout the report with a rationale for the assessment.

**Accessibility of materials and data enrichments generated during the study.** It should be noted that, given the nature of the material included in the Archive, and in accordance with legal measures and guidance received, the study team is unable to redistribute and/or share any of the content included in the Archive outside of a bespoke virtual machine used during the project to review materials, or other than the client and experts engaged in this study. As such, the data extractions, transcripts and other raw data that enabled the analysis contained within this report are not included within this document. Relevant data enrichments generated may be requested by interested researchers from WODC.

## 1.4. Document purpose and outline

This document summarises the activities, results and findings of the work undertaken during Phases I and II of the study. The document is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2 – Al Qa’ida’s historical trajectory.** This chapter discusses the historical trajectory and development of Al Qa’ida, from its establishment until the present day, based on the results of a literature review and interviews conducted during Phase I of the study.
- **Chapter 3 – Al Qa’ida’s ideology.** This chapter provides an overview of Al Qa’ida’s ideological foundations, focusing on its key tenets, concepts and scholars of reference based on the results of a literature review and interviews conducted during Phase I of the study.
- **Chapter 4 – Al Qa’ida’s strategy.** This chapter provides an overview of Al Qa’ida’s strategy – focusing on its objectives, means and operations, targets, and enablers – based on the results of a literature review and interviews conducted during Phase I of the study.
- **Chapter 5 – Al Qa’ida’s organisation.** This chapter provides an overview of Al Qa’ida’s organisation – focusing on its structure, networks, affiliates, and relations with non-affiliated *Jihadist* groups – based on the results of a literature review and interviews conducted during Phase I of the study.
- **Chapter 6 – Previous and ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive.** This chapter provides an overview of existing and ongoing research that was found to have used data included in the Bin Laden Archive that are available in the public domain, based on the results of a literature review and interviews conducted during Phase I of the study.
- **Chapter 7 – Image analysis.** This chapter provides an overview of the methods employed and findings stemming from image-analysis activities conducted during Phase II of the study.
- **Chapter 8 – Audio analysis.** This chapter provides an overview of the methods employed and findings stemming from audio-analysis activities conducted during Phase II of the study.
- **Chapter 9 – Video analysis.** This chapter provides an overview of the methods employed and findings stemming from video-analysis activities conducted during Phase II of the study.
- **Chapter 10 – Text analysis.** This chapter provides an overview of the methods employed and findings stemming from text-analysis activities conducted during Phase II of the study.
- **Chapter 11 – Bin Laden journal analysis.** This chapter provides an overview of the methods employed and findings stemming from analysis activities conducted on the so-called Bin Laden Journal conducted during Phase II of the study.
- **Chapter 12 – Conclusions.** This chapter provides an overview of the study findings and results.

In addition, this document includes three annexes:

- **Annex A** provides a more in-depth description of the methodology used in Phase I.
- **Annex B** provides a more in-depth description of the methodology used in Phase II.
- **Annex C** lists the stakeholders and experts consulted, and reproduces the protocols and tools employed for this purpose.



## 2. Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory

---

This chapter presents a brief historical overview of Al Qa'ida, charting its evolution and key milestones throughout the three decades of its existence. The chapter concludes by reviewing what is known about Islamic extremist terrorism in the Netherlands, and in particular about Al Qa'ida's impact in the country and the connections the organisation had to some of the Netherlands' citizens. The chapter is intended to set the context for subsequent focused discussions of the group's ideology, strategy and organisation, which are presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this report.

### 2.1. Al Qa'ida's foundation and the build-up to the 9/11 attacks

Al Qa'ida was established in 1988 in Afghanistan by Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri and a close cohort of battle-hardened jihadists who had fought throughout the 1980s against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Following the defeat of Soviet forces, Al Qa'ida was founded to mobilise *jihad* in other parts of the world, and began to emerge as the dominant actor within a growing global *Jihadist* movement.<sup>15</sup>

The extended name of Al Qa'ida stands for 'The Base of *Jihad*'. Initially the organisation had a number of aims, involving both local and global objectives. First, the organisation aspired to remove regimes in the Middle East (the 'near enemy', or *al-adu al-qarib*) that were seen as sympathetic to Western governments, and which were impeding the establishment of a pan-Islamic caliphate that would uphold *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and implement Islamic law (*Shari'a*). Second, the organisation sought to attack the US and Israel – and their allies and interests – directly (the 'far enemy', or *al-adu al-ba'id*), in order to erode their support of apostate regimes in the Middle East, and to weaken their presence in Muslim countries (for example, by achieving a removal of US soldiers from Saudi Arabia, the land with the two holiest sites in Islam).

At the time, Al Qa'ida initially consisted of a small number of individuals operating within a strongly hierarchical structure that was clearly regulated through internal processes and mechanisms. Al Qa'ida recruits performed *Jihad* (*mujahideen*) alongside fellow Muslims in '*jihad* arenas'<sup>16</sup> such as Tajikistan, Bosnia, Kashmir and Somalia.<sup>17</sup> In order to strengthen the organisation, Bin Laden sought to establish a central territorial 'base' from which to coordinate Al Qa'ida's operational activities. This vision was realised

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<sup>15</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (2004).

<sup>16</sup> Within *Salafiya-Jihadia*, a '*jihad* arena' is a region in which Muslims fight non-Muslims. *Salafiya-Jihadia* considers it the obligation of all Muslims to participate in this fighting. See: Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

in 1991, when Bin Laden established operational headquarters in Sudan,<sup>18</sup> as well as international branch offices and *mujahideen* training camps.<sup>19</sup> From these bases, Al Qa'ida coordinated and executed a series of terrorist attacks targeting Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the US.<sup>20</sup> In the first half of the 1990s, Al Qa'ida also sought to establish a significant presence in the Horn of Africa region, and particularly in Somalia and Kenya.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, research on organisational records conducted by Watts et al. (2007) indicates that in the Somali context, Al Qa'ida was unable to overcome the unfavourable operational conditions and challenges that also limited the effectiveness of Western intervention in the country (e.g. high operational costs; difficulty conducting recruitment of supporters). Furthermore, Al Qa'ida found itself at a cultural disadvantage when trying to further its presence in the region due to cultural factors – such as clannism – limiting the attractiveness of joining Al Qa'ida in countries such as Somalia and Kenya, where (i) Al Qa'ida was perceived as a foreign organisation along the lines of Western countries, thus not enjoying the anticipated support and credit as liberators of Muslims; and (ii) existing tribes and clans freely provided social services and benefits akin to those offered by Al Qa'ida in return for joining the organisation.<sup>22</sup> In the mid- to late-1990s, Al Qa'ida operatives and cells also took part in the Bosnian and Chechen wars. In Bosnia in particular, several hundred Salafi *Jihadists*, some of whom affiliated with Al Qa'ida, took part in the conflict on the side of Bosnian Muslims. In this period, not least thanks to connections with Bosnian intelligence and security services, Al Qa'ida operatives in Bosnia established training camps, infrastructure, and channels for transferring financial resources with the aim of turning Bosnia into the base for launching *Jihadist* operations in Europe.

Following a failed assassination attempt on Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995 and in the run-up to the 1998 attacks on US missions in Kenya and Tanzania, diplomatic pressures on the Sudanese regime led to the expulsion of Bin Laden from Sudan in 1996. Bin Laden then returned to Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban regime, which had secured control over the country in the same year.<sup>23</sup> Since then, the core of Al Qa'ida and its top cadres have been located in Afghanistan and – reportedly – in what was known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, which was merged in May 2018 with the neighbouring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>24</sup>

During this phase Al Qa'ida implemented a limited number of high-profile attacks, targeting US and Western interests and presence in Muslim countries. Some of the organisation's first external attacks were carried out in 1998: the coordinated bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salam (Tanzania).<sup>25</sup> These attacks incurred a total of 225 fatalities and an estimated 5,000 casualties.<sup>26</sup> In 2000,

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<sup>18</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

<sup>19</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>21</sup> Watts et al. (2007).

<sup>22</sup> Watts et al. (2007).

<sup>23</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

<sup>24</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

the group carried out an attack against the US Navy, striking the USS Cole in the Gulf of Aden (Yemen) that killed 17 US Sailors.<sup>27</sup>

The first phase of Al Qa'ida's development culminated in the first coordinated attacks on US soil at the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, in an event that thereafter became known as 9/11. These attacks were conducted by 19 Al Qa'ida operatives and claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 individuals. The attacks served to bring both Al Qa'ida and the threat posed by global *Jihadi* terrorism to the highest levels of international attention.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.2. Organisational decline and resurgence on the global stage and in the Iraqi context

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Afghanistan and the bombing campaign conducted by US and allied forces on the hideouts of Al Qa'ida fighters and cadres in the country led to a critical erosion and destruction of Al Qa'ida's physical infrastructure and organisational capacity. The killing or capture of a quarter of Al Qa'ida's top commanders severely weakened the organisation's core and leadership. Al Qa'ida was therefore on the back foot in Afghanistan, where it completely relied on Taliban fighters to retain control of territory and establish safe hideouts.<sup>29</sup>

While Al Qa'ida forces and infrastructure in Afghanistan were significantly degraded as a result of the US-led invasion of the country, a 'second wave' of Al Qa'ida activity followed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>30</sup> The invasion and subsequent insurgency galvanised Al Qa'ida sympathisers, and gave the organisation new life and an opportunity to broaden and revive its operations.<sup>31</sup> After 2003, a number of high-profile terrorist attacks and continuous insurgent activities were conducted by Al Qa'ida and its affiliated or associated groups and cells in Afghanistan, Iraq and on the international stage.

Internationally, a series of terrorist attacks was carried out by operatives inspired by Al Qa'ida after 2003. Among such attacks are the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, Riyadh, Jakarta and Istanbul – which together killed a total of 132 people and wounded 959 others<sup>32</sup> – and the 2004 bombings in Madrid that led to 191 deaths and 1,755 injuries. In 2005, Mohammad Sidique Khan – a terrorist who had received direct training by Al Qa'ida – led a small cell in a coordinated bombing of the transportation system in London, killing 56 people and injuring over 700.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of Iraq, 2004 came to be a pivotal moment in Al Qa'ida's history, and marked a turning point for the wider global *Jihadi* movement. In this year the insurgent organisation *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* – led by the *Jordanian* Jihadist Abu Musab al Zarqawi – swore allegiance to Al Qa'ida, forming what

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<sup>27</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg (2010).

<sup>28</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Jones et al. (2017).

<sup>31</sup> Jones et al. (2017).

<sup>32</sup> Jones et al. (2017).

<sup>33</sup> Jones et al. (2017).

came to be known initially as Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) or Al Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (*Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*), and later as the Islamic State (see Section 2.4 below).<sup>34</sup>

Between 2003 and 2007 Al Qa'ida in Iraq conducted a wide array of brutal attacks and operations, targeting not only Western forces in the country, but also the Shia population in Iraq, as well as members of the Sunni community cooperating with occupation and government forces. While Al Qa'ida in Iraq initially posed a significant challenge to coalition and Iraqi forces, the 2007 'surge' of US troops in Iraq and the Sunni Arab Awakening (*Sahwah*) against Al Qa'ida led to an almost complete eradication of the organisation in Iraq between 2007 and 2010.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, following the invasion of Iraq and the downgrading of Al Qa'ida's infrastructure in Afghanistan, between 2002 and 2007 Al Qa'ida began to transform into a more distributed organisation characterised by a growing network of regional affiliates and smaller cells that were led by a central establishment (Al Qa'ida in Afghanistan).<sup>36</sup> This central establishment was responsible for defining and steering the movement's overall strategic approach and its outlook, as well as for loosely coordinating the activities of regional affiliates and connected cells.<sup>37</sup> At an operational level, however, the planning and conduct of attacks was already the apparent remit of regional chapters, such as Al Qa'ida in Iraq, and cells and groups trained or inspired by the organisation, such as those responsible for the London and Madrid bombings.<sup>38</sup> Through this adaptation in approach, Al Qa'ida retained its strategic ability to conduct high-profile attacks against what it termed 'far' enemies and their interests,<sup>39</sup> although the greater part of its activities appeared to be shifting from terrorism to full-scale, regionally focused insurgency activities against near-enemy institutions and forces, particularly in the Iraqi context.

### 2.3. Al Qa'ida's adaptation and evolution through regional chapters

Following the initial failures of Al Qa'ida in Iraq and the continued constraints under which Al Qa'ida in Afghanistan operated, the organisation went through a period of relative decline and reorganisation. In the years between 2007 and 2010, this reorganisation involved the establishment and co-opting of new regional affiliates.

In 2007, the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*al Jama'ah al Salafyyah Li al Da'wah wa al Qital*) swore allegiance to Al Qa'ida and became officially known as Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in 2009 Al Qa'ida announced the opening of a new organisational front in Yemen, bringing what used to be a constellation of competing *Jihadist* groups under the collective banner of Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>41</sup> During this phase, with the establishment of these new groups

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<sup>34</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>35</sup> Byman (2013).

<sup>36</sup> Gunarata and Oreg (2010).

<sup>37</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>38</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>39</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>40</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Simcox (2015).

and regional affiliates, Al Qa'ida continued its move towards a more decentralised and diffused structure held together at the ideological and strategic level by a central core based in Afghanistan. In light of this, Al Qa'ida in Afghanistan began to be known among scholars and practitioners as 'Al Qa'ida Central' or 'Al Qa'ida Core'. During this period, Al Qa'ida Central's main role appeared to be the provision of ideological leadership, and central management of relations with regional affiliates.<sup>42</sup> This organisational principle of 'centralisation of decision and decentralisation of execution' reportedly remains in operation to date.<sup>43</sup>

Between 2007 and 2010 only a limited number of attacks were conducted at the international level.<sup>44</sup> From an operational perspective, Al Qa'ida's Central organisational capacity appeared to have been degraded and regional affiliates did not yet display either an ambition or a capacity to conduct attacks beyond their theatres of operations in the Greater Middle East region.<sup>45</sup> The weakening of the organisation was indeed also apparent at the local level, as the group's regional affiliates struggled to mobilise credible insurgencies and successfully erode the territorial control of local governments, instead relying primarily on kidnappings and other small-scale attacks.<sup>46</sup>

One of the key factors behind the downgrading of Al Qa'ida's capabilities was the sustained counterterrorism efforts of the US and its allies. In particular, drone strikes targeting Al Qa'ida safe havens served to repeatedly decimate the group's cadres and leadership across different regions,<sup>47</sup> eroding the group's physical infrastructure and organisational capacity. In response to these challenges, Al Qa'ida began to pursue a more proactive approach to recruitment and propaganda, most notably through AQAP's leader Anwar Al Awlaki. Al Awlaki propagated *Jihadist* propaganda through a range of social media platforms (including a blog, Facebook and MySpace pages, and a YouTube channel), presenting sermons and lessons designed to radicalise individuals and broaden the ranks of jihadist groups, principally Al Qa'ida's.<sup>48</sup> Another component of Al Qa'ida's media arsenal included online *jihadist* magazines, such as *Inspire* and *Resurgence*, as well as publications authored by Al Awlaki (including 'The New Mardin Declaration: An Attempt at Justifying the New World Order', and a series of articles titled 'Why did I choose Al Qa'ida?').<sup>49</sup>

## 2.4. Al Qa'ida after the Arab Spring and the death of Bin Laden

The trajectory of Al Qa'ida and its structure were irreversibly affected by a series of events occurring in 2011. In May 2011, a raid conducted by US Navy SEALs led to the killing of Osama Bin Laden in a

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<sup>42</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>43</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>44</sup> Such as the mass shootings in Fort Hood, Texas, and Little Rock, Arkansas; as well as the failed bombing of the Northwest Airline Flight 253. See: O'Brien (2011); Helfstein & Wright (2011).

<sup>45</sup> The *Greater Middle East* is a term introduced in the early 2000s that denotes a set of contiguously connected countries stretching from Morocco in the west all the way to Pakistan in the east. Countries included under this label include all Arab-speaking countries, Mauritania, the Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

<sup>46</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>47</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>48</sup> Novenario (2016).

<sup>49</sup> Novenario (2016).



compound in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad. During this raid, a wealth of data and electronic devices were captured. Part of this data would later be released by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in what came to be known as the Bin Laden Archive (also known as the *Abbottabad Compound Material*), comprising of thousands of texts, images, audios and videos.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that data included in this Archive would have only a limited, historical relevance with regard to investigating any subsequent developments and events concerning Al Qa'ida and the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism.

Following Bin Laden's death, long-time Deputy Ayman Al Zawahiri took on the leadership of Al Qa'ida Central and of the broader organisation. While questions as to the feasibility of Al Qa'ida surviving Bin Laden arose, political instability and uprisings occurring throughout the Greater Middle East region from 2011 onwards opened opportunities for Al Qa'ida and like-minded organisations to exploit power vacuums and political transition periods to establish stronger footholds in the region. Prior to his death, letters retrieved from the Bin Laden archive indicate that Bin Laden had identified the Arab Spring as a 'formidable event', and sought to focus Al Qa'ida's efforts on media outreach and 'guidance' to incite those who had not yet revolted, and to warn them against settling for 'half solutions' (such as engaging in secular political processes by forming political parties).<sup>51</sup>

The opportunities and dynamics resulting from the Arab Spring reinforced organisational trends that were already at play in previous years. In this regard, a growing number of groups and organisations came to be affiliated and work in loose coordination with Al Qa'ida Central. The pursuit and implementation of this devolved, networked approach was set out by Bin Laden in the organisation's 20-year plan and strategy, and continued under Al Zawahiri's leadership.<sup>52</sup> For instance, in 2012 the Al Shabaab group in Somalia became officially affiliated with Al Qa'ida.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in West Africa, the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (*Jama'at al Tawhid wa al Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiyya*), and later the *Al Mourabitoun Group*, became formally affiliated with the organisation.<sup>54</sup> Over time, Al Qa'ida's network of affiliations grew in number and scope, expanding the organisation's geographical reach. For example, in 2014, Al Qa'ida established Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) as its official affiliated organisation in the region; AQIS established a foothold in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and continues to pose an increasing threat to India and Bangladesh. In 2018, Al Qa'ida further expanded into the region by establishing an affiliate organisation in Kashmir (*Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind*).<sup>55</sup>

In the context of Al Qa'ida's attempts at exploiting the instability generated by the Arab Spring, a particularly notable development occurred in Syria. In 2011, an offshoot of Al Qa'ida was established in the country under the name of Front for the Support (*Jabhat Al Nusra*, otherwise known as Al Nusra Front).<sup>56</sup> This group came to play a prominent role in the early days of the Syrian uprising and civil war,

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<sup>50</sup> Lahoud et al. (2012).

<sup>51</sup> Lahoud et al. (2012).

<sup>52</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>53</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>54</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>55</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>56</sup> Hoffman (2013).

emerging at the forefront of the most effective attacks against the Syrian regime, particularly in the western part of the country.<sup>57</sup> On the national stage, however, Al Nusra competed with the group then known as the Islamic State in Iraq (the name taken by Al Qa'ida in Iraq after 2006) for leadership of the *Jihadist* movement. At this time, the Islamic State was in fact active in eastern and northern parts of Syria, where it conducted insurgent and terrorist attacks.<sup>58</sup> Rivalry between the two groups led to escalating tensions and simmering conflicts, which resulted in arbitration between the two groups conducted by Ayman Al Zawahiri. This recognised Al Nusra's role in Syria and organisational independence from the Islamic State in Iraq, who had previously tried to absorb and subsume the rival group.

Following this ruling, an unprecedented internal cleavage emerged between Al Qa'ida Central and a regional affiliate. The leadership of the Islamic State in Iraq defied the explicit orders of Al Zawahiri to maintain separation between the two groups' areas of influence and work, attempting to use force to subsume Al Nusra to create the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, in June 2014 the group renamed itself as the Islamic State (IS), announcing the restoration of a worldwide caliphate.<sup>60</sup> Following these developments, the group was dismissed from Al Qa'ida.<sup>61</sup> This dissociation of IS can be understood to have been partially driven by a desire to safeguard the long-term objectives of Al Qa'ida Central and retain the legitimacy of its core leadership following the death of Bin Laden.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the Islamic State's extreme and indiscriminate use of violence posed reputational challenges to Al Qa'ida, causing the latter organisation to seek to distance itself from the former.<sup>63</sup>

From an organisational perspective, the split between Al Qa'ida and the Islamic State represented a significant threat to the former group's global influence on and leadership of the *Jihadi* movement. Competition between the two groups ensued as both organisations attempted to dominate the *Jihadist* ideological space, retain hegemony over different countries and regions, and secure affiliation of different groups.<sup>64</sup> The Islamic State appeared to gain significant advantage over Al Qa'ida in terms of both recruitment and territorial control – it succeeded in establishing and developing a well-oiled propaganda and recruitment machine that enabled the organisation to attract to its territories a large number of so-called foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Europe and other regions in the world at a speed and volume hitherto unseen.<sup>65</sup>

In this context, Al Qa'ida began to work with groups rumoured to be linked to Al Qa'ida Central cadres, but who lacked formal affiliation with it. This was seen in part as a tactical approach to avoid backlash and external pressures on regional affiliates and groups from Western countries and their regional allies. For instance, during the 2012 Northern Mali Conflict, the Jihadist group *Ansar Dine* was initially alleged to be

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<sup>57</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>58</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>59</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>60</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>61</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Turner (2015).

<sup>63</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>64</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>65</sup> Tuner (2014).

connected with Al Qa'ida but refuted such allegations, although the allegiance between the two groups finally came to light in 2017. Similarly, in 2017 Jabhat Al Nusra merged with the Syrian Islamist rebel group *Ahrar Al Sham* to form a group independent of Al Qa'ida that was called *Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham*. International observers perceived this to be primarily a cosmetic decision designed to increase the palatability of the group at the regional level by shedding the Al Qa'ida branding. However, the group reportedly continues to have significant ties and links with Al Qa'ida Central, and to work in coordination with it.

Despite assertions that Al Qa'ida Central has been weakened in recent years following the emergence of Islamic State, Al Qa'ida continues to wield significant influence in some regions. For example, AQAP has considerably expanded its reach, seizing and controlling more territory, gaining new adherents and supporters, forming new alliances, and continuing to innovate tactically as it seeks to extend its attack capabilities beyond the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>66</sup> The Islamic State, on the other hand, has been less successful in gaining recruits or securing territory in this region.<sup>67</sup> While AQAP previously maintained a strong focus on conducting international attacks (such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris of early 2015),<sup>68</sup> the organisation has now shifted the bulk of its activities towards its home region, capitalising on local instability and forming new alliances with local tribes.<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, consistent with the historical approach of the *Jihadi* terrorist movement, sustained attrition against the West continues to form a core component of both Al Qa'ida's and the Islamic State's overarching strategies, although the latter group appears to have retained stronger capacity over recent years. Notable cases of attacks in Western countries in recent years include the Paris, Brussels and Barcelona attacks conducted by individuals claiming to be affiliated to the Islamic State.<sup>70</sup>

## 2.5. Islamic extremist terrorism in the Netherlands

As evidenced by the previous paragraphs, *Jihadi* terrorism remains a considerable threat to Western countries, including the Netherlands, and to their allies. Al Qa'ida has not conducted a large-scale attack in the Netherlands to date; however, the group's ideology and influence have been apparent in the country since the early 2000s, with its ideology inspiring a number of individuals and actions.

Al Qa'ida has reportedly been recruiting individuals in the Netherlands since the early 2000s, largely targeting potential recruits through mosques and prisons, as well as through trusted networks and individual recruiters. These recruitment activities have been identified as a threat to the democratic legal order in the Netherlands.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Simcox (2015); Horton (2018).

<sup>67</sup> Simcox (2015); Horton (2018).

<sup>68</sup> Simcox (2015).

<sup>69</sup> Horton (2018).

<sup>70</sup> Heil (2017); Van Ostaeyen (2016).

<sup>71</sup> AIVD (2002).

The terrorist threat in the Netherlands appears to be posed mostly by home-grown terror cells and individuals. One particularly influential jihadist group that operated in the Netherlands in recent years is the so-called *Hofstadgroep* (Hofstad Network).<sup>72</sup> While the Hofstad Network had no confirmed formal links with Al Qa'ida, the organisation appeared to be a grassroots group of radicalised individuals inspired by Al Qa'ida's ideology who operated independently, without external support or supervision.<sup>73</sup> In 2004, Hofstad Network member Mohammed Bouyeri assassinated prominent filmmaker Theo van Gogh. The motivation and justification of the attack suggested that the group had embraced a form of *Jihadist* terrorism akin to that promoted by Al Qa'ida, and which was understood by Bouyeri to be part of his religious duty.<sup>74</sup>

More broadly, the assassination of Theo van Gogh was understood to be designed to 'drive a wedge' between different parts of Dutch society, notably between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities.<sup>75</sup> The events following the assassination – including vandalism and attacks on mosques and Islamic schools throughout the country, and counter attacks on churches – indicate that the group had been partially successful in this aim.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, Dutch authorities found that following the assassination, many young Muslims were more attracted to radical Islam, identifying the perpetrators of the attack as 'role models'.<sup>77</sup> The consequences of this attack therefore highlighted the risk to social and political cohesion, and wider national security, posed by terrorist groups in the Netherlands.

From the early 2000s up until 2010, the terrorist threat in the Netherlands fluctuated in its severity. A number of threats or foiled plans were reported, involving groups and individuals either linked with, or inspired by, Al Qa'ida. For example, a Yemen-based Al Qa'ida commander was reported to be behind the failed terror attack on the Northwest Airlines flight at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol in 2009, although the attack was primarily meant to symbolically target the United States, rather than the Netherlands.<sup>78</sup> The terrorist threat level was lowered by the NCTb later that year,<sup>79</sup> as it appeared that the Netherlands was becoming less of a priority target among international Jihadist groups.<sup>80</sup> Yet, in 2010, the terrorist threat appeared to resurge, as several Al Qa'ida fighters issued public threats against the Dutch football team during the football world cup, and against Dutch politicians Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Threats against Geert Wilders have since continued to emerge online.<sup>81</sup>

Following the 2011 Arab Spring, the terrorist threat in the Netherlands seemed to increase. A number of Dutch nationals and residents became radicalised and travelled to conflict zones in support of Islamic State. By 2013, approximately 190 Dutch nationals were fighting in Syria (with an estimated 70:30 split between

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<sup>72</sup> Vidino (2007).

<sup>73</sup> Vidino (2007).

<sup>74</sup> Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (2006).

<sup>75</sup> Vidino (2007).

<sup>76</sup> Vidino (2007).

<sup>77</sup> Vidino (2007).

<sup>78</sup> Walker & McGreal (2009).

<sup>79</sup> The NCTb was reorganised and renamed NCTV in 2012.

<sup>80</sup> NRC Handelsblad (2009).

<sup>81</sup> De Volkskrant (2010).

those fighting for Islamic State and Al Qa'ida).<sup>82</sup> While the flow of new recruits to conflict areas has diminished over time, in recent months growing concerns have been expressed by policymakers and counterterrorism practitioners at the potential security threat posed by FTFs returning to their countries of origin and residence, including the Netherlands.<sup>83</sup> Figures provided by Dutch authorities in March and September 2018 put the number of Dutch FTFs who travelled to Iraq and Syria to join terrorist organisations at around 300. Of these, to date 60 have reportedly been killed and 55 have returned to the Netherlands.<sup>84,85</sup>

Furthermore, in recent years both Al Zawahiri and the leadership of the Islamic State have called upon Muslims across the globe to commit attacks in their own countries. Two attacks in the Netherlands have been considered Islamist terrorist attacks: the 2018 Amsterdam Centraal station stabbing, where a man stabbed and injured two tourists, and the 2019 Utrecht tram shooting, where a man shot and killed three people, injuring seven others. While both attacks were conducted by Islamist extremists, they do not appear to have necessarily been linked to Al Qa'ida. Additionally, planned attacks have continued to be uncovered. For instance, while the last terrorist attack in Europe that was explicitly linked to Al Qa'ida occurred in 2015,<sup>86</sup> Al Qa'ida seems to continue to pose a threat to the Netherlands, developing an infrastructure in Syria and Yemen through which it could potentially launch attacks targeting the country.<sup>87</sup> Several thousands of supporters of *jihadism* (and particularly of the Islamic State) are reportedly present amongst the Dutch population, and a significant level of interaction and activities is also witnessed online.<sup>88</sup> A number of terrorism-related arrests have been made between 2016 and 2018, including eight for planning terrorist attacks and two for incitement to terrorism.<sup>89</sup>

As a result of these developments, in the recent past the terrorist threat assessment in the Netherlands was increased up to 'substantial', meaning that there is perceived to be a real chance of a terror attack.<sup>90</sup> However, since December 2019 the terrorist threat assessment has decreased, ranking as 'conceivable' as of January 2021. This ranking stands at level three on a scale of one to five, with level five representing the highest threat.<sup>91</sup> More broadly, the Dutch *jihadist* movement is continuing to develop. Following the collapse of the Islamic State caliphate, the movement appears to be readjusting itself, and there is a chance that Dutch *jihadists* may begin to adopt a 'revenge narrative', blaming the West for this collapse.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Bakker & Grol (2013).

<sup>83</sup> NCTV (2016; 2018); European Parliament (2017).

<sup>84</sup> NCTV (2018).

<sup>85</sup> NCTV (2018).

<sup>86</sup> The January 2015 terrorist attack on the headquarters of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris was conducted by gunmen who claimed to be operating on behalf Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula. The organisation later claimed responsibility for the attack.

<sup>87</sup> NCTV (2018).

<sup>88</sup> NCTV (2018).

<sup>89</sup> Musch (2018); AT5 (2018).

<sup>90</sup> NCTV (2018).

<sup>91</sup> NCTV (2018).

<sup>92</sup> NCTV (2018).

This increased terror threat has led the Netherlands to adopt a series of specific strategies and initiatives designed to stem the flow of radicalised Dutch nationals departing for Syria, and to manage those who return. These efforts included the publication of a National Counterterrorism Strategy for the 2016 to 2020 period (*Nationale Contraterrorismestrategie 2016–2020*);<sup>93</sup> the use of a national terrorism list to monitor suspected individuals and groups; and the establishment of the Counterterrorism Alert System to warn the government and key sectors about possible threats.<sup>94</sup>

Box 2.1 provides an overview of the key findings of this chapter.

### Box 2.1 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory and relevance to the Dutch context

- Al Qa'ida was established in the 1980s in Afghanistan by Osama Bin Laden and a close cohort of battle-hardened jihadists who had fought the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
- Al Qa'ida was initially a strongly hierarchical organisation. To develop, it sought to establish a territorial base from which to coordinate its activities. After a stint in Sudan, the organisation relocated to Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban regime. Al Qa'ida's core leadership has since been based in this country and in the areas formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.
- The US invasion of Afghanistan led to a critical erosion and destruction of Al Qa'ida's physical infrastructure and organisational capacity. Al Qa'ida began to transform into a more distributed organisation characterised by a growing network of regional affiliates and smaller cells led by a central establishment.
- Al Qa'ida was particularly galvanised following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which provided the organisation with an opportunity to broaden and revive its operations. Similarly, in the same timeframe a series of terrorist attacks at the international level was carried out by operatives inspired by Al Qa'ida.
- The organisation went through a period of relative decline and reorganisation between 2007 and 2010. This process entailed the establishment and co-opting of new regional affiliates. In this period, only a limited number of attacks was conducted internationally, as neither Al Qa'ida Central nor its affiliates appeared to have the organisational capacity required to conduct attacks beyond their local theatres of operations in the Greater Middle East region. This was also due to sustained counterterrorism efforts conducted by the US and its allies.
- In May 2011, Osama Bin Laden was killed during a raid on his compound conducted by US Navy SEALs. Ayman al Zawahiri replaced him as Al Qa'ida's leader.
- Political instability and uprisings occurring throughout the Greater Middle East region from 2011 onward opened opportunities for Al Qa'ida and like-minded organisations to exploit power vacuums and political transition periods to establish stronger footholds and presence.
- In Syria, an unprecedented internal cleavage emerged between Al Qa'ida Central and the leadership of the Islamic State. This ultimately led to the Islamic State's separation from Al Qa'ida.
- Between 2014 and 2017, the Islamic State appeared to gain a significant advantage over Al Qa'ida in terms of both recruitment and territorial control, establishing an effective propaganda and recruitment approach that led to the arrival of large numbers of so-called foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Europe and other regions. Al Qa'ida continues to wield nonetheless significant influence in several regions (e.g. in the Arabian Peninsula, where it expanded the extent of its territorial control).
- Al Qa'ida has not conducted large-scale attacks in the Netherlands to date, although its ideology appears to have inspired a number of individuals and actions.
- Following the period of the so-called Arab Spring, the terrorist threat in the Netherlands seemed to increase. A number of Dutch nationals and residents became radicalised and travelled to conflict zones in support of the group called Islamic State.

<sup>93</sup> NCTV (2018b).

<sup>94</sup> NCTV (2018b).



### 3. Al Qa'ida's ideology

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The findings and material presented in this chapter offer perspectives on Al Qa'ida's ideology as a basis for validating, challenging or expanding the state of current knowledge.

#### 3.1. The ideological foundations of Al Qa'ida

Understanding the ideology on which Al Qa'ida is based is essential to understanding the organisation's behaviours, motivations and ultimate long-term objectives. Al Qa'ida's ideology is based on a strict interpretation of Islam – so-called Salafism – which aims to return to the traditions of the so-called 'pious predecessors' (*al-Salaf al-Salih*). Al Qa'ida's ideology focuses on the concept of global *Jihad*,<sup>95</sup> and is characterised by a strong anti-US and anti-Western sentiment.<sup>96</sup>

The Salafi movement first emerged in the 19th century, stemming from the teachings of Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. These Islamic scholars advocated a return, by means of rational interpretation, to early Islam,<sup>97</sup> including to the beliefs, understanding of core texts and teachings, methods of worship and conduct typical of the early years of this religion,<sup>98</sup> rejecting heretical innovations (*bid'a*) that had led to the corrupting and withering of the religion's spirit.

In addition to elements of Salafi thought, Al Qa'ida's ideology draws upon selected parts of Islamic scholarship and traditions.<sup>99</sup> The group builds on teachings of scholars, such as Sayyid Qutb, who advocated for the use of *Jihad* as a tool to rid Islam of man-made innovations and deviations that had brought the Muslim community and mankind back to an era of Godless ignorance (*Jahiliyya*). In the context of Al Qa'ida's ideology, *jihad* is thus seen not in a narrow sense, as a collective obligation to defend the community of Muslims (*Ummah*), but rather as an individual duty to be pursued by Muslims in a manner akin to that of the five pillars of faith (*Aqidah*). In this view, *Jihad* enables the advancement and establishment of a truly Islamic society, beyond the mere hope that preaching and exposition of the faith and religion to society will attain this.

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<sup>95</sup> The term *jihad* refers to the doctrine of a 'holy struggle'. Militant interpretations of jihad (including those of Al Qa'ida) view jihad as a sacred, global battle between the Muslim faithful living in the land of Islam (*Dar al Islam*) and the non-faithful living outside of it in the land of war (*Dar al Harb*). See: Rudner (2013).

<sup>96</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (2004); Lahoud (2012).

<sup>97</sup> 'Early Islam' refers to the form of Islam that was practised by the generation of Muslims who lived at the time of the prophet Muhammad and his companions.

<sup>98</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (2004).

<sup>99</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (2004).



The key ideological elements and principles undergirding Al Qa'ida have remained stable throughout the years. However, a number of nuances and conflicting views can be observed within the Salafi *Jihadist* movement itself, and within the narrower phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. Such nuances emerge from different interpretations of key principles and the ways in which certain objectives can be attained. These differences have generally centred on disagreement over the interpretation and application of *Jihad*, differences in focus on the 'near' and 'far' enemy, and the acceptable use of violence, including against Shia Muslims.<sup>100</sup>

Such ideological nuances and differences have had a number of practical implications on how Al Qa'ida has structured itself throughout the years as an organisation, and on how it has operated in different contexts and areas of operations. However, scholars focusing on Al Qa'ida and other *Jihadist* groups also emphasise the tendency of such groups to adjust theological and ideological arguments to fit operational realities and needs, rather than the other way around.<sup>101</sup> This view is also echoed by scholars who emphasise the importance of conceptualising Al Qa'ida's ideology as being an ever-changing current of thought that is constantly reshaped by the ideas and views of surviving *Jihadists*, as much as by the needs and requirements of the organisation at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.<sup>102</sup> A similar view is presented by Nelly Lahoud (2012) in her analysis of Fadil Harun's autobiography: 'Al Qa'ida's ideology is pragmatic and inclusive of Sunni Muslims espousing different theological orientations'.<sup>103</sup>

In this regard, rather than trying to pin down Al Qa'ida's ideology as a firm set of ideas and guidelines, Box 3.1 and Box 3.2 provide the reader with an overview of some of the scholars and ideologues who directly or indirectly shaped the views of the organisation, as well as an overview of some key principles present within Islamic scholarship.

### Box 3.1 Scholars and ideologues identified in the reviewed literature as influential over Al Qa'ida

**Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328)** is one of the most widely quoted scholars by Islamic *jihadists*.<sup>104</sup> A prominent Syrian theologian and political figure,<sup>105</sup> Taymiyyah's doctrine was based on the supreme authoritativeness of the Quran, Sunnah of Muhammad and the early Muslim community.<sup>106</sup> He advocated a literal interpretation of Islamic scripture, and closely tied Islam to politics and state building.<sup>107</sup> Taymiyyah encouraged Mongols to wage *jihad* in order to capture Damascus.<sup>108</sup>

**Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792)** is known as the founder of Wahhabism.<sup>109</sup> The vision of Islam that Al-Wahhab

<sup>100</sup> Jones (2014); Lahoud (2012); Byman (2012).

<sup>101</sup> Stenersen (2018).

<sup>102</sup> Watts (2016).

<sup>103</sup> Fadil Harun, also known as Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, was a member of Al Qa'ida who served at one time as the organisation Confidential Secretary (*Amin Sirr al-Qa'ida*), and then as leader of the organisation's presence in East Africa (Lahoud, 2012).

<sup>104</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>105</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d.).

<sup>106</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d.).

<sup>107</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d.).

<sup>108</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>109</sup> Olidort (2017).

established continues to be used by *jihadis* today.<sup>110</sup> Al Wahhab advocated for *tawhid* (divine oneness), which he pursued through radical activism against *shirk* (polytheistic derivations, such as the construction and visitation of shrines). Notably, Al Wahhab formed a pact with Muhammad bin Sa'ud that guided the formation of the expansionist Saudi state.<sup>111</sup>

**Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897)** is commonly known as the founder of the modern pan-Islamic movement, which aimed to unite the Muslim world under the banner of Islam.<sup>112</sup> Afghani's work was largely driven by anti-imperialist sentiment, particularly a hostility towards British rule in Muslim lands.<sup>113</sup> Afghani strove to maintain the independence of Muslim countries under a banner of Islamic unity.<sup>114</sup> He advocated for political reform and is known to have been one of the first Islamic figures to have participated in political activism.<sup>115</sup> Afghani's success in spreading his message is partially attributed to the fact that he wrote in Arabic, which made his work more accessible to Muslim audiences.<sup>116</sup>

**Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905)** was an Egyptian religious scholar and reformist who is known for substantially altering the course of modern Islamic thought.<sup>117</sup> Heavily influenced by Jamal ud-Din al-Afghani, Abduh called for the reform of Islam and sought to cleanse it from its contemporary 'decadence' and return it to its 'pristine' state.<sup>118</sup> He sought to address the economic, political and social challenges of the Muslim world by making Islam relevant to the modern context through the advancement of the sciences, educational reform, social reform and Pan-Islamism.<sup>119</sup> Abduh was critical of rigid Islamic thought, holding that while Islam's foundational texts were of central importance, they were open to interpretation by qualified Islamic scholars.<sup>120</sup> Abduh's views were later taken up by Arab Nationalism after the First World War, and are seen to have laid the foundation of Islamic modernism that inspired the Salafi movement.<sup>121</sup>

**Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966)** is regarded as one of the most prominent thinkers of modern Islamism and an ideological forefather of modern jihad.<sup>122</sup> Qutb combined Islamic fundamentalism with anti-Western sentiments, as well as advocating for *jihad* against perceived un-Islamic Middle Eastern regimes.<sup>123</sup> He understood the world to be in a state of *jahiliyya*, or ignorance, and preached a reformist Salafi ideology that greatly influenced Al Qa'ida.<sup>124</sup>

**Omar Abdel Rahman (1938–2017)** was a leader of Gama'a al-Islamiyya, a terrorist organisation based in Egypt.<sup>125</sup> Rahman's teachings were based on the *takfir* ideology, and he advocated for killing of non-believers, including apostate Muslims.<sup>126</sup> Rahman had a strong intellectual influence on Al Qa'ida; during the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, he met with Bin Laden's mentor Abdullah Azzam.<sup>127</sup> Rahman's beliefs were also

<sup>110</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>111</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>112</sup> CIS (N.d).

<sup>113</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d).

<sup>114</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d).

<sup>115</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d).

<sup>116</sup> Oxford Islamic Studies Online (N.d).

<sup>117</sup> RLP (N.d).

<sup>118</sup> CIS (N.d).

<sup>119</sup> RLP (N.d).

<sup>120</sup> RLP (N.d).

<sup>121</sup> CIS (N.d); RLP (N.d).

<sup>122</sup> Aaron (2008); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>123</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>124</sup> Kelvington (2016); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>125</sup> IPT (N.d).

<sup>126</sup> Brown (2007); IPT (N.d).

<sup>127</sup> IPT (N.d).

characterised by a strong anti-Western sentiment; in 1990 he moved to New York, and began recruiting *jihadists* to plan attacks in the US.<sup>128</sup>

**Abdullah Yussuf Azzam (1941–1989)** was one of the co-founders of Al Qa’ida al Sulhah, which later became Al Qa’ida.<sup>129</sup> Azzam is understood to have been one of Bin Laden’s primary mentors.<sup>130</sup> Azzam’s influence on Al Qa’ida is characterised by three contributions: first, he authored the key fatwa that required participation in *jihad* as obligatory; second, he re-conceptualised the notion of ‘defensive *jihad*’ against non-Muslim governments; and finally, he is thought to have influenced the Afghan *jihad* during the Soviet–Afghan war, acting as recruiter, catalyst and preacher.<sup>131</sup> Following the end of the Soviet–Afghan war, Azzam and Bin Laden held divergent views on a number of key strategic issues, which led Al Qa’ida to become a separate organisation under the leadership of Bin Laden.<sup>132</sup>

**Anwar al Awlaki (1971–2011)** was a US-born *jihadist* who served as the director of external relations for AQAP. Al Awlaki is thought to have played a particularly prominent role in Al Qa’ida’s narrative, and is known to have successfully influenced aspiring *jihadis* in the West. Al Awlaki advanced an anti-Western ideology designed to galvanise potential *jihadis* into action. The US Counter-Terrorism Project has identified at least 89 extremists in the US and Europe who were directly influenced by Al Awlaki in their terrorist activities.

**Abu Musab al Zarqawi (1966–2006)** was the first leader of the Islamic State, formerly AQL. Zarqawi’s ideology was based on Salafi *jihadism*,<sup>133</sup> and he was supportive of killing Shiite Muslims and other minority groups in pursuit of *jihad* and the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate.<sup>134</sup> Al Zarqawi is said to have been heavily influenced by Al Maqdisi, who was formerly his mentor.<sup>135</sup> A school of thought known as the ‘Zarqawi Doctrine’ stipulates indiscriminate violence against all who do not support Salafi *jihadism*.<sup>136</sup>

**Ayman al Zawahiri (1951–present)** is the current Emir of Al Qa’ida, and was formerly Bin Laden’s deputy. Al Zawahiri is thought to have been influenced by the writings of scholars such as Sayyid Qutb and Ibn Taymiyyah.<sup>137</sup> Al Zawahiri drew ideas from Qutb, such as the notion of a war of ideology in which the Islamic faith is in conflict with the materialism of the West.<sup>138</sup> Al Zawahiri emphasised both Salafism and armed *jihad*;<sup>139</sup> he is known to have advocated for an Islamic revolution against apostate governments, which he sought to replace with governments who would rule in accordance with Islamic law.<sup>140</sup>

**Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi (1959– present)** was one of Al Qa’ida’s key religious thinkers.<sup>141</sup> He also mentored Al Zarqawi and therefore heavily influenced the ideology of AQL and, subsequently, ISIS.<sup>142</sup> He later criticised his former mentee for his indiscriminate use of violence and targeting of other Muslims.<sup>143</sup> Abu Maqdisi disavowed all forms of polytheism which, in his view, includes not only the worship of multiple gods but also adherence to man-made, non-

<sup>128</sup> IPT (N.d).

<sup>129</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>130</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>131</sup> Kamolnick (2017).

<sup>132</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>133</sup> Johnston et al. (2016).

<sup>134</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>135</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>136</sup> Meijer (2009).

<sup>137</sup> Aboul-Enein (2004).

<sup>138</sup> Aboul-Enein (2004).

<sup>139</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>140</sup> Aboul-Enein (2004).

<sup>141</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>142</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>143</sup> Wagemakers (2008).

Islamic laws.<sup>144</sup> He held that, as God is the only rightful recipient of a Muslim's loyalty, any adherence to man-made laws or obedience to non-Islamic rulers is a form of polytheism.<sup>145</sup>

**Abu Bakr Naji (rumoured to be Mohammad Hasan Khalil al-Hakim, unknown–2008)** was a key Islamic ideologue who authored a document entitled 'The management of savagery: The most critical stage through which the *Umma* will pass'.<sup>146</sup> His writings were designed to provide a new strategy for Al Qa'ida and other *Jihadist* groups with the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate.<sup>147</sup> Abu Bakr Naji's approach emphasised the use of violence and also called for overly nationalist sentiments to be 'managed' so as not to detract from *Jihad's* global cause.<sup>148</sup>

### Box 3.2 Key concepts of Islamic traditions and their understanding and interpretation in Al Qa'ida's ideology and thought<sup>149</sup>

**Ba'ya.** A concept referring to the oath of allegiance made to a ruler or leader, currently broadly employed by Salafi *Jihadist* groups to mark and sanction an allegiance and affiliation from one organisation or individual to another.

**Da'wa.** A concept referring to proselytising, literally translating as 'making an invitation' to spread the faith.

**Kufr.** A concept referring to unbelief and encapsulating both *kufr akbar*, or major unbelief, and *kufr asghar*, or minor unbelief. *Kufr akbar* refers to individuals who stray away in significant manners from the teachings of Islam, for instance through *shirk*, and are considered apostates.

**Ijtihad.** A concept referring to individual reasoning and interpretation of the sources of Islamic law, the Qur'an and the ahadith, or sayings, of the Prophet. This concept is embraced by Salafi *Jihadists* and stands in contrast to Taqlid, or the imitation, of one of the existing schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

**Jihad.** A concept broadly referring to struggle which encapsulates both jihad al-nafs, a struggle for self-improvement, and lesser and greater *Jihad*, concepts referring to armed struggle for the defence of Islam and for its active spreading. In particular, greater *Jihad* is seen by adherents to Salafi-Jihadism as the necessary means to achieve self-fulfilment, as well as to dar al-Islam, the abode of Islam.

**Hakimiyya.** A concept also referred to as *tawhid hakimiyya* that was significantly developed by Saiyyd Qutb in his writings. *Hakimiyya* refers to sovereignty of God on all human affairs, including those associated with politics and political systems. In this regard, Al Qa'ida's and salafi *jihadists'* support of this concept translates in a call for the implementation at societal level of Shari'a (Islamic law). Failure to do so is tantamount to *kufr*.

**Jahiliyya.** A concept that refers to ignorance in different instances. First, *jahiliyya* refers to the ignorance of Islam in populations of Arabia prior to the revelation by Mohammed. Second, *jahiliyya* can refer to the purported ignorance of Islam by Muslims as understood by scholars such as Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Saiyyd Qutb who argued that the decline of Muslim societies was the result of Muslims straying away from Shari'a and the tenets of Islam.

**Takfir.** A concept referring to the act of pronouncing someone as an unbeliever, placing them outside of the community of believers. The admissibility and extent of practice of *takfir*, particularly against other Muslims with associated risks of *fitna*, has been subject to different interpretations among Salafi *Jihadists*, leading to significant practical implications in the strategies and operations employed by different groups.

**Tawhid.** A concept encapsulating the oneness and unity of God from which several implications descend. First, *tawhid rububiyya* or the unity of lordship, which refers to God's unique qualities and powers. Second, *tawhid al-asma' wa-l-sifat* or affirmation of the unity of God's names and attributes, which prohibits the assignment of such characteristics

<sup>144</sup> Wagemakers (2008).

<sup>145</sup> Wagemakers (2008).

<sup>146</sup> Naji (2016).

<sup>147</sup> Naji (2016).

<sup>148</sup> Naji (2016).

<sup>149</sup> Meijer (2009).

to any other human beings, including kings and leaders. Third, *tawhid uluhiyya* or oneness of divinity, which reaffirms God as the only object for any and all worship.

**Shirk.** A concept broadly referring to idolatry and polytheism. *Shirk* stands in contrast to respect of *tawhid* and covers any practice designed, from a Salafi *Jihadist* perspective, to associate God's qualities and powers with other objects of veneration, humans and intermediaries.

### 3.2. Al Qa'ida's ideology beyond religious influences

Al Qa'ida's ideology and rhetoric should not be seen as emanating solely from Islamic tradition and from religious concepts and theological arguments. On the contrary, a review of the existing literature suggests that Al Qa'ida as an organisation has relied over the years on a number of utilitarian and political arguments to reinforce its standing and resonance.<sup>150</sup>

With regard to its external-facing communication activities and framing efforts, over the years al Qa'ida has been seen to reach deeply into the collective consciousness of Muslims around the globe. The public portrayal of its ideology has been seen as touching on historical traditions and themes that would resonate across the global community of faithful Muslims, but also to focus on topics akin to those of anti-imperialist and pan-Arabic rhetoric. For instance, literature reviewed indicates that the themes employed in Al Qa'ida's publications and communications centre on the Palestinian cause, as well as on liberating Saudi Arabia, framing this as the land of the two Holy Mosques occupied by apostate military forces.<sup>151</sup>

Equally, Al Qa'ida invested much of its framing efforts into adopting polarising narratives designed to drive a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims, portraying the actions of Al Qa'ida and like-minded *Jihadist* groups as a 'us vs them' opposition and battle. In this regard, political rhetoric adopted by Al Qa'ida and by its affiliate groups has been observed to emphasise conspiratorial worldwide views, suggesting the existence of global alliances and plots that link 'crusaders' and 'Zionists' against Islam and are designed to oppress Muslim populations. Under this narrative, local regimes are presented as collaborators and henchmen working on behalf of enemies of Muslim people. For instance, in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, Al Qa'ida-affiliated forces in Iraq framed in their narrative and propaganda the Iraqi ruling government as an illegitimate one, a puppet regime installed by invading forces that was allowed to operate on its behalf in the oppression of Iraqi people. These arguments were designed to corroborate and reinforce those stemming from religious scholarly tradition, and to broaden the palatability of Al Qa'ida's ideological offering. For instance, in addition to messages discrediting the Iraqi government as an illegitimate one, Al Qa'ida's rhetoric also emphasised – through the use of selective religious arguments – the permissibility of conducting martyrdom operations and attacks on governmental forces, as well as on civilians from other sects.<sup>152</sup>

Box 3.3 provides an overview of the key findings of this chapter.

<sup>150</sup> Hafez (2007); Moghadam (2008).

<sup>151</sup> Hellmich (2014).

<sup>152</sup> Hafez (2007); Moghadam (2008).

### Box 3.3 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's ideology

- Al Qa'ida's ideology is based on Salafism, a strict interpretation of Islam, and draws upon selected parts of Islamic scholarship and traditions.
- Al Qa'ida's ideology revolves around the concept of *Jihad*, which it advocates to be conducted globally and which it sees as the means required to enable the advancement and establishment of a truly Islamic society.
- Al Qa'ida's ideology does not stem solely from Islamic tradition and from religious concepts; rather it also builds on political and cultural grievances in the Arab and Muslim world to increase its resonance and palatability.
- Literature reviewed emphasises the importance of not overstating the coherence of Al Qa'ida's ideology, noting the tendency of *Jihadists* to adjust theological and ideological arguments to fit operational realities and needs. The key ideological elements and principles of Al Qa'ida's ideology have remained stable throughout the years, but various nuances and conflicting views have been noted to display different concepts.



## 4. Al Qa'ida's strategy

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This chapter presents an overview of the state-of-the-art knowledge concerning Al Qa'ida's strategy, as well as of the main themes and debates characterising existing literature on this subject. In particular, it discusses themes and debates within the literature on Al Qa'ida's:

1. Strategic objectives;
2. Means and operations;
3. Targets; and
4. Supporting elements and enablers.

The findings and material presented in this chapter offer perspectives on Al Qa'ida's strategy as a basis for validating, challenging or expanding the state of current knowledge.

### 4.1. Strategic objectives

The literature reviewed as part of Phase I work suggested that Al Qa'ida's strategy is examined and understood in different ways by scholars and practitioners, particularly regarding its objectives and means of delivery. No clear consensus exists among scholars concerning Al Qa'ida's strategic timelines, which are conceptualised in different ways by authors within the literature. There also appears to be limited consensus regarding Al Qa'ida's short-to-medium term strategic objectives. Equally, since no organisation-sanctioned conceptualisation of Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory and strategy currently exists, the debates and conceptualisations presented throughout this chapter are the result of interpretation and analysis of Al Qa'ida's activity and currently available primary data.<sup>153</sup>

#### 4.1.1. Conceptualising and understanding Al Qa'ida's strategy

Within the literature, scholars and experts have formulated different approaches to analysing and conceptualising Al Qa'ida's strategy. Some understandings are drawn directly from Al Qa'ida's strategic documents,<sup>154</sup> while other scholars base their analyses on observations of the organisation's behaviours, activities and internal correspondence to draw their conclusions. Overall, a broad consensus seems to coalesce around a number of high-level organisational objectives, such as the goal of defeating the enemy in the West; the goal of overturning apostate regimes in Muslim countries; and the goal of securing some

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<sup>153</sup> See for example Novenario (2016); Kamolnick (2017); Grace (2018a; 2018b); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>154</sup> Rudner (2013); Jones (2014); Turner (2015).



degree of territorial control to establish a permanent presence and foothold from which to conduct operations.<sup>155</sup>

Some sources conceptualise Al Qa'ida's strategic development and approaches according to different historical phases. For instance, some scholars have developed an understanding of Al Qa'ida's strategy based on retrospective analysis of the organisation's activities to conceptualise its strategic timelines.<sup>156</sup> Other scholars base their analysis on the limited number of formal strategic documents from Al Qa'ida that are available in the public domain. One source used to generate insights into Al Qa'ida's initial strategic objectives is the organisation's 20-Year Strategic Plan – as reviewed by Rudner (2013), Turner (2015) and Fishman (2016) – which presents Al Qa'ida's strategy according to a 20-year, seven-stage grand strategy aimed at ultimately achieving 'total victory' over the West and apostate regimes.<sup>157</sup> The literature reviewed provides an overview of the following seven strategic objectives of the organisation's 20-Year plan<sup>158</sup>:

1. **'The Awakening'** is the first of seven stages in Al Qa'ida's 20-year strategic plan.<sup>159</sup> The Awakening phase is reported as being designed to provoke Western (US) attacks on Muslim populations and galvanise global Jihadism.<sup>160</sup> The 20-year strategic plan is understood to have commenced with the 9/11 attacks.<sup>161</sup>
2. **'Opening the eyes'** is the second strategic objective identified as characterising Al Qa'ida's 20-year strategic plan, and aims to put the West and its allies in a defensive position<sup>162</sup>, slowly eroding their strengths.<sup>163</sup> Writings from Ayman Al Zawahiri suggest that this objective was to be achieved at least in part by baiting the United States to overreact to attacks, subsequently incurring crippling human and financial losses during its fight against *Jihadists*.<sup>164</sup> This strategic phase is understood to have commenced following the 9/11 attacks, and it was during this period that Al Qa'ida transformed itself into a global 'brand' with a primary focus on Iraq. One paper authored by a contemporary *Jihadi* thinker associated with Al Qa'ida asserts that this phase of the strategy was successful, in that the 9/11 attacks and subsequent conflict in Afghanistan achieved the goal of luring the United States into a conflict that discredited it and negatively affected its resources.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> See for example Rudner (2013); Jones (2014); Turner (2015); Novenario (2016); Kamolnick (2017); Grace (2018a; 2018b); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>156</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>157</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>158</sup> Rudner (2013); Fishman (2016).

<sup>159</sup> Rudner (2013); Turner (2015).

<sup>160</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>161</sup> Rudner (2013); Turner (2015).

<sup>162</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>163</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>164</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>165</sup> Naji (2016).

3. **'Arising and standing up'** represents the third objective and stage of the 20-year plan. This phase was intended to run from 2007–2010 and was expected to involve attacks on new areas of operations beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, such as Turkey and Israel.<sup>166</sup>
4. **'Downfall of Apostate Muslim regimes'** represents the fourth objective and phase of Al Qaida's 20-year plan. Regimes viewed as un-Islamic were identified within the text as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other oil-producing nations in the Arabian Gulf region.<sup>167</sup> The ultimate aim of this fourth strategic phase is to eradicate apostate regimes in the Muslim world, before resuming operations targeting the United States and other Western countries.<sup>168</sup>
5. **'Declaration of Caliphate'** represents the fifth phase of Al Qa'ida's strategy. This point resonates as also being one of the 11 strategic directives for Al Qa'ida stipulated by Ayman Al Zawahiri,<sup>169</sup> although the organisation never realised this objective.<sup>170</sup>
6. **'Total confrontation'** represents the sixth strategic objective and phase of Al Qa'ida's 20-year plan, and anticipates returning the focus of the organisation to attacking the enemy through a 'total war' on non-believers.<sup>171</sup> The existing literature provides minimal insight into plans concerning this phase.<sup>172</sup>
7. **'Definitive victory'** constitutes the ultimate phase of Al Qa'ida's 20-year plan and is expected to entail the 're-establishment of the Caliphate'.<sup>173</sup> Re-establishment of the global Caliphate is seen from the perspective of the organisation to constitute definitive victory.

While the 20-year plan sets out specific timelines, it should be noted that this should not be read as a linear, time-bound checklist of activities.<sup>174</sup> In practice, many phases included in the 20-year plan appear to have overlapped and run concurrently, while others have so far never been implemented. This reflects Al Qa'ida's tendency towards a flexible, opportunistic approach to strategy and operations.

Overall, while the 20-Year Plan discussed by Rudner (2013), Turner (2015) and Fishman (2016) represents a potentially useful primary source, it does not appear that this plan provides the basis for an in-depth review and analysis of Al Qa'ida's strategy. Nonetheless, **although the literature does not contain any additional in-depth analyses of this document, implicit within other sources reviewed under Phase I of this study is a shared understanding of the main goals presented in the 20-year plan as characterising Al Qa'ida's overall strategic thinking.** Different elements of the 20-year plan, such as the objective of attacking the West and apostate regimes in Muslim countries with a view to securing territorial control across different regions, are discussed. This suggests that several authors are loosely aligned in their understanding of the

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<sup>166</sup> Rudner (2013); Turner (2015); Fishman (2016).

<sup>167</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>168</sup> Turner (2015).

<sup>169</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>170</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>171</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>172</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>173</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>174</sup> Rudner (2013).

core elements of Al Qa'ida's overarching strategy and thinking. For instance, Grace (2018a; 2018b) proposes an understanding of Al Qa'ida's strategy as based on three phases that broadly align and resonate with the trajectory of the 20-year plan discussed above. According to Grace (2018a; 2018b), Al Qa'ida's strategy entails (i) attacking the West; (ii) defeating internal enemies (e.g. apostate Islamic regimes); and (iii) re-establishing the Caliphate.<sup>175</sup>

In addition to identifying broadly shared themes as characterising Al Qa'ida's strategy, **a consensus also emerges from the literature characterising the organisation's strategic approach as being flexible and aimed at capitalising on opportunities as they arise at the global and regional levels, exploiting political and social developments as they occur.**<sup>176</sup>

In this regard, while the 20-year plan identifies specific targets and phases, in reality Al Qa'ida's strategic and operational focus appears to have largely been driven by external developments independent of the organisation. For instance, this is evidenced by Al Qa'ida's strategic shift towards Iraq in the early 2000s, which aimed at capitalising on political developments occurring in the country following the 2003 US invasion. Similarly, the organisation was seen as shifting the strategic focus of its operations in Yemen from attacks against far enemies, towards a strategy geared towards establishing a broader territorial foothold and stable presence in the aftermath of the turmoil initiated in the country by the demonstrations and civil unrest of 2011.<sup>177</sup>

#### 4.1.2. Balancing strategic priorities

Different views emerge within the literature reviewed as regards short- and medium-term priorities pursued by Al Qa'ida to achieve its final strategic objective, the re-establishment of a global Caliphate. Literature reviewed suggests that **the organisation balances different priorities in response to opportunities and developments on the ground, seeking both to hurt its enemies and to establish a territorial presence and foothold with support from local populations.** In this regard, Riedel (2010) describes Al Qa'ida's strategy as being three-fold and entailing:

1. Wearing down the West in Iraq, Afghanistan and other theatres of operations;
2. Building a network of allies to fight the West and apostate Islamic regimes, while in the meantime creating a safe haven in South Asia; and
3. Building a network of recruits and supporters in the West to facilitate the undertaking of attacks in these countries.<sup>178</sup>

With regards to the re-establishment of the Caliphate, the literature reviewed suggests this is a long-term objective. It could even be seen as a secondary concern for the organisation in the short- and medium-term, and one that is not directly connected to decision-making processes around short- and medium-term activities.

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<sup>175</sup> Grace (2018a; 2018b).

<sup>176</sup> Turner (2015).

<sup>177</sup> Rudner (2013); Simcox (2018); Grace (2018).

<sup>178</sup> Riedel (2010).

For instance, Novenario (2016) suggests that the organisation is primarily concerned with attacking the West and weakening it, rather than establishing the Caliphate.<sup>179</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen (2017) suggests that the organisation sees the Caliphate as something that ‘is in the future which will be realised when the time comes’, but that it is by no means a central part of Al Qa’ida’s activities and strategies in the short- and medium-term.<sup>180</sup> Similarly, other scholars such as Riedel (2010) and Kamolnick (2016) refer to ‘restoring the Islamic Caliphate’ or an ‘Islamic super-state’ only as the ultimate long-term strategy of Al Qa’ida. Jones (2014) argues instead that the Al Qa’ida Central leadership based in Pakistan remains committed to the establishment of a regional caliphate, extending from Southern Europe to Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, rather than to the creation of a global one.<sup>181</sup> Nonetheless, an examination of primary sources collected in recent years suggests that the re-establishment of the caliphate remains a central goal for Al Qa’ida’s leadership, including in the period following Bin Laden’s death. Gohel (2017) for instance points to the 11 directives laid out by Al Zawahiri upon his appointment as Al Qa’ida’s leader, the ninth of which confirms the re-establishment of the Caliphate as one of the organisation’s objectives.<sup>182</sup>

**Overall, documents retrieved from Al Qa’ida so far and data available in the public domain do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the organisation’s strategic objectives and of the ways in which different strategic objectives and goals (e.g. establishing a territorial presence; hurting the far enemy; working towards the re-establishment of a caliphate) are prioritised and pursued by the group.**<sup>183</sup>

## 4.2. Means and operations

The existing literature reviewed under Phase I does not provide a clear, conclusive survey of the means by which Al Qa’ida has pursued the implementation of its strategy and, most importantly, of the decision-making and prioritisation mechanisms employed to determine its operational plans. Equally, there is no certainty that Al Qa’ida has designed and adopted clear decision-making structures and approaches. Nonetheless, existing research, based on limited primary data, suggests that Al Qa’ida has been characterised by a multiplicity of approaches and by the presence of different factions advocating for the use of different operational approaches.

In particular, some scholars explicitly identify within Al Qa’ida a range of factions and currents that differ in their approach and preferences for achieving the organisation’s strategic objectives. More broadly, a consensus within the literature differentiates the following factions – first identified by Brown (2007) – as characterising Al Qa’ida’s conflicting operational directions over the years:

- **Planners.** With this label, Brown (2007) and others refer to those factions and groups in Al Qa’ida that privilege the use of continuous insurgent tactics over prolonged periods of time and in the hands of complex networks and groups, as opposed to the preparation of high-impact attacks conducted by smaller cells and lone-wolf actors. These so-called planners are reportedly committed

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<sup>179</sup> Novenario (2016); Kamolnick (2017).

<sup>180</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen (2017).

<sup>181</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>182</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>183</sup> Gohel (2017).

to building an effective guerrilla organisation and attacking the West indirectly and primarily in partner and allied countries in ways similar to past methods of other irregular military organisations engaged in asymmetric conflicts.<sup>184</sup>

- **Propagandists.** With this label Brown (2007) and others refer to those strands and groups within Al Qa’ida who sought to establish the organisation as a global brand with a view to inspiring a global movement and unifying violent Islamist groups.<sup>185</sup>

Other authors have not explicitly identified the same two factions suggested by Brown (2007), but a review of primary literature echoes the findings of Brown (2007), suggesting that such divergent views came from the very top of the organisation – Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri also differed at points in their views regarding the preferred means and operations to be conducted and prioritised. Gohel (2017) cites internal correspondence between the two Al Qa’ida leaders that exposes disagreements over the focus of the group’s operations following 9/11.<sup>186</sup> While Bin Laden reportedly sought to prioritise the continuation of strikes against US targets (in operations carried out by local cells), Al Zawahiri advocated for a shift towards a more local strategy focusing on US targets in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as on so-called apostate regimes throughout the Muslim world. This disagreement appears to reflect the crux of Brown’s (2007) argument; namely, that disagreements largely centre on the use of insurgent tactics, or high-profile attacks conducted by lone wolves or smaller cells.<sup>187</sup>

Based on an analysis of the available literature, it appears that insurgency has been favoured by Al Qa’ida as the primary means for attacking the near enemy (namely apostate governments), while Al Qa’ida’s global brand and the dissemination of propaganda has been designed to inspire attacks against the far enemy (the West).<sup>188</sup> Evidence suggests that insurgent activities have therefore remained a fundamental part of Al Qa’ida’s strategic approach.

Al Qa’ida writings indicate that Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri designed Al Qa’ida’s strategic approach accordingly, emphasising insurgency as the primary means for conducting *jihad* against apostate governments.<sup>189</sup> With regards to Al Qa’ida’s conduct of insurgency, a number of sources examine the approaches Al Qa’ida has taken in order to adapt to the competition posed by the Islamic State in recent years.<sup>190</sup> For example, the ‘General Guidelines for Jihad’ published by Al Zawahiri in 2013 reveal a more population-centric strategy.<sup>191</sup> This strategy is explicitly restrained in its use of violence, and discourages the targeting of women, children and local Sunni populations, and also religious minorities and non-Sunnis unless provoked.<sup>192</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the approach taken by the Islamic State in its theatres

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<sup>184</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>185</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>186</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>187</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>188</sup> Ingram (2017); Aaron (2008).

<sup>189</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>190</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>191</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018); Jones (2014).

<sup>192</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

of operations, and emphasises an attention to ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of local populations. Multiple other sources also highlight this population-centric approach.<sup>193</sup> However, the literature also reveals a level of disagreement regarding this new restrained approach.

### 4.3. Targeting the near and the far enemy

Available literature on Al Qa’ida’s strategy reveals a tension within its targeting approach, in terms of its prioritisation of the ‘near’ and the ‘far’ enemy. The near/far enemy debate was reportedly a subject of disagreement between Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri, with Bin Laden preferring to focus on attacks against the West (the so-called ‘far’ enemy), and Al Zawahiri prioritising more local targets and actions in Muslim countries against so-called apostate regimes (the ‘near’ enemy).<sup>194</sup> The tension between the near and far focus is further exacerbated by Al Qa’ida’s networked structure involving globally distributed cells, often with their own local agendas, which is discussed further in Chapter 6 of this report.

Discussions of Al Qa’ida’s targeting approach appear prominently within the literature. Some sources provide detailed analyses of Al Qa’ida’s approach to the near and far enemies, while others mention the subject in passing. The numerous sources addressing this topic within the literature do not appear to agree on the nature of Al Qa’ida’s targeting strategy, reflecting the internal disputes within the organisation itself and the lack of information concerning its decision-making and prioritisation processes.

Within the literature, there is a general agreement that Bin Laden was primarily concerned with the far enemy;<sup>195</sup> targeting the far enemy is understood to have been ‘critical’ for Bin Laden.<sup>196</sup> Under Bin Laden’s leadership, therefore, Al Qa’ida’s strategy appears to have been mostly focused on attacks against the West.<sup>197</sup> Sources such as Collins (2012) and Byman (2012) depict Al Qa’ida’s ‘far enemy’ focus as a central component of the organisation’s global *jihadist* mission and identity, with Byman (2012) also suggesting that the organisation actively discouraged overly nationalist sentiments amongst its members, in order to avoid an excessively localised focus that could result in fragmentation of the movement.<sup>198</sup>

Overall, the literature does not provide a clear understanding of the targeting priorities of Al Qa’ida’s current leadership, with multiple sources differing in their interpretations. Some documents provide evidence of Al Zawahiri aligning with Bin Laden in encouraging Al Qa’ida fighters to refocus their efforts away from nationalist causes towards the far enemy in the West.<sup>199</sup> Abu Musab Al Suri is also reported to have issued similar instructions, stating that revolution and consolidation of power in Islamic nations must be postponed until the US and its allies had been defeated.<sup>200</sup> Other sources, however, highlight that in his

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<sup>193</sup> Johnston et al. (2016); Mendelsohn (2018); Stenersen (2017).

<sup>194</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>195</sup> See for example Byman (2012); Jones (2014); Gohel (2017).

<sup>196</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>197</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>198</sup> Collins (2012); Byman (2012).

<sup>199</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>200</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

correspondence, statements and activities, Al Zawahiri has indicated a preference for targeting the near enemy.<sup>201</sup>

Some sources provide empirical evidence suggesting that in recent years, Al Qa'ida has been mainly focused on operations against the near enemy. Jones (2014) notes that in 2013 approximately 99 per cent of attacks by Al Qa'ida and its affiliated groups were conducted against local targets in regions such as North Africa and the Middle East. Based on this data, Jones suggests that Al Qa'ida has shifted towards a temporary focus on the near enemy. However, it could also be argued that the local focus of these attacks is a result of Al Qa'ida's increasingly dispersed and localised structure,<sup>202</sup> rather than a reflection of the strategic priorities of the central organisation. Yet this local focus could also have been driven by the agenda of the central leadership, as evidenced by Al Zawahiri's stated preference for a near-enemy approach over the medium-term, until defeating the West becomes more attainable.<sup>203</sup> Gohel (2017) reiterates this point, suggesting that while targeting the far enemy remains a priority, Al Zawahiri has renewed Al Qa'ida's emphasis on the near enemy, seeking to establish safe bases across the Islamic world in which the organisation can recoup on its previous losses and grow.<sup>204</sup>

Anne Sternersen (2017) provides a particularly detailed analysis of the near/far dichotomy in Al Qa'ida's thinking, and provides an alternative viewpoint by suggesting that the line between these two strategic approaches has become increasingly blurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Al Qa'ida (and other *jihadi* groups) have begun to attack both near and far enemies.<sup>205</sup> This viewpoint aligns with Rudner's (2013) assertion that, throughout the pursuit of its strategy, Al Qa'ida's affiliated networks and local cells have continued to operate against different designated targets according to opportunity and shift in the strategic context.<sup>206</sup>

## 4.4. Supporting elements and enablers

Within the literature, a number of sources provide detailed information on the logistical and supporting elements underpinning the implementation of Al Qa'ida's strategy, such as its training practices, recruitment, propaganda, operational security measures and the role envisioned and reserved for women.

### 4.4.1. The role of training camps and middle-managers

An examination of the existing literature reveals an understanding and **consensus within the literature of the use of training camps by Al Qa'ida**. Multiple publications reviewed provide descriptions of **training practices at Al Qa'ida's camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan**. However, there is limited to no information available as to Al Qa'ida's training practices and facilities, if any, following the loss of its physical infrastructure in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US invasion. This suggests that our current knowledge

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<sup>201</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>202</sup> For a more detailed discussion on this networked approach, please see Chapter 6 of this report.

<sup>203</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>204</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>205</sup> Sternersen (2017).

<sup>206</sup> Rudner (2013).

and understandings of contemporary Al Qa'ida training practices is somewhat limited and specific to particular practices and approaches of different regional affiliates.

Training camps played an important role in the development of Al Qa'ida's organisational and operational capabilities throughout its early years. Training camps such as those established in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1990s provided a physical infrastructure to support the indoctrination and training of recruits from across the globe.<sup>207</sup> The training received at these camps is said to have involved general combat training, as well as ideological guidance.<sup>208</sup> Aaron (2008) provides a particularly detailed account of the training methods at Al Qa'ida's bases; drawing from primary sources such as the *Manchester Document*, he argues that training courses at the Afghanistan bases were held at three separate levels: basic training, advanced training, and special training.<sup>209</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018) similarly recall the existence of a network of training camps in Afghanistan,<sup>210</sup> in which recruits were offered training in guerrilla warfare, explosives-making, and forging of documents.<sup>211</sup> Al Qa'ida's military training is found to have included training resources from the West, such as manuals from the US Army that could be accessed online and via other electronic formats.<sup>212</sup>

A limited number of sources reviewed also discuss the role of Al Qa'ida's middle managers in facilitating the training of recruits during the early years of the organisation. As part of an in-depth analysis of the wider role of middle managers across the organisation, Neumann et al. (2011) draw upon multiple case studies to suggest that middle managers have historically played a key role in Al Qa'ida's training strategy, largely by connecting potential recruits, particularly those from Western countries, to Al Qa'ida training facilities, supporting the organisation's global reach.<sup>213</sup> However, this analysis of the role of middle managers within Al Qa'ida's training operations is based on a select number of qualitative case studies, and may therefore warrant further research, particularly in the context of post-9/11 training and recruitment activities.

Following receipt of training at Al Qa'ida's Central locations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida recruits generally left these countries to conduct *jihad* in their home countries or other '*jihad* arenas'.<sup>214</sup> In this regard, literature suggest that Al Qa'ida also provided training to members of other Islamist groups, without requiring them to join the organisation, in a move assumedly designed to expand the organisation's soft power influence over the global *Jihadist* movement.<sup>215</sup> Since the loss of its physical infrastructure in Afghanistan, however, Al Qa'ida's training practices have received considerably minimal attention in the literature, highlighting a gap in current knowledge.

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<sup>207</sup> Rudner (2013); Byman (2012).

<sup>208</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>209</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>210</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>211</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>212</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>213</sup> Neumann et al. (2011).

<sup>214</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>215</sup> Stenersen (2017).



#### 4.4.2. Media, communications and online propaganda and recruitment

Propaganda has been a key tool employed by Al Qa'ida throughout its history to inspire and recruit Jihadists across the globe. Within the literature reviewed, multiple sources provide information on Al Qa'ida's use of propaganda and the role of this tool within the organisation's broader strategy. A general consensus in the literature indicates that the use of media releases and publications has played a central role in Al Qa'ida's global strategy, supporting and enabling the dissemination of its anti-Western narrative and enabling the global recruitment of aspiring *jihadists*.<sup>216</sup> More recently, discussion of Al Qa'ida's propaganda has focused on comparing the organisation's approach with that of the Islamic State.<sup>217</sup>

Publications reviewed suggest that in the years under Bin Laden's leadership, Al Qa'ida's media strategy was primarily designed to present a coherent global narrative for *Jihad*, and aimed to avoid any inconsistent or undesirable messaging resulting from the actions of the organisation's growing global network of affiliates or like-minded cells and individuals.<sup>218</sup>

In later years, literature reviewed highlights the importance and role played by Al Qa'ida's online magazine *Inspire*, which was published through its affiliate group in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>219</sup> Scholars indicate that *Inspire* was designed to pursue a multiplicity of objectives, including:

1. Advancing Al Qa'ida's narratives, persuading populations affected by Al Qa'ida's presence of the merit of its strategic objectives and actions;
2. Facilitating the radicalisation of would-be *jihadists* through emotive messaging and rhetorical tools, such as what is described by Ingram (2017) as 'identity-choice appeals'<sup>220</sup>; and
3. Providing specific operational and tactical-level instructions and guidelines to support the operations and initiatives of independent cells and individuals.<sup>221</sup>

Literature reviewed suggests that the latter goal of inspiring actions by sympathisers and supporters based in Western countries who operated as individuals or members of small, unsupervised cells was central to the purpose of the publication.<sup>222</sup> In this regard, it is worth noting that documents from the Bin Laden Archive reviewed by Lahoud et al. (2012) suggest that Bin Laden sought to centralise all media releases from Al Qa'ida and its affiliates so that Al Qa'ida Central could retain greater control over the messages being projected. Bin Laden is reported to have expressed frustration with publications such as *Inspire*, due to the possible reduced control over the actions of local cells and lone wolves, which he viewed as posing a danger to Al Qa'ida's global approach and guidance over the *Jihadist* movement.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> See for example Aaron (2008); Lahoud et al. (2012); Kamolnick (2017).

<sup>217</sup> Novenario (2016); Ingram (2017); Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2018).

<sup>218</sup> Sivek (2013); Novenario (2016); Ingram (2017).

<sup>219</sup> See for example Sivek (2013); Novenario (2016); Ingram (2017).

<sup>220</sup> Ingram (2017).

<sup>221</sup> Sivek (2013); Nesser et al. (2016); Ingram (2017).

<sup>222</sup> Sivek (2013).

<sup>223</sup> Sivek (2013).

#### 4.4.3. Security guidelines and provisions

A limited number of sources within the literature reviewed provide insights into the security measures adopted by Al Qa'ida to protect its leadership and operatives. Publications that address these topics provide considerably detailed information or analysis; however, these sources are small in number and therefore the evidence should not be taken as being fully conclusive. For instance, Al Zawahiri's paper, 'Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants' provides detailed guidance on operational security to be adopted by *Jihadists*.<sup>224</sup> The security measures stipulated in this document include guidelines on the use of disguises and obtaining false identity documents, the use of safe houses and the security precautions to be taken around meetings, as well as financial precautions.<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, documents retrieved from the Abbottabad compound and included in the Bin Laden Bookshelf reveal that Bin Laden issued clear guidelines on the security measures to be taken by Al Qa'ida operatives. Collins (2012) provides a particularly detailed examination of these documents, revealing information concerning security guidelines issued to *Jihadists*, and security guidelines to be applied specifically with regard to Osama Bin Laden's own security (such as, for example, avoiding phone and email communications to avoid interception and tracking with a view to geo-locating him).<sup>226</sup>

However, while available primary sources provide detailed insights into the guidelines issued by specific members of the leadership as to desired security guidelines,<sup>227</sup> there is a lack of analysis and data enabling researchers to assess the extent to which these guidelines have been upheld as part of common practice by Al Qa'ida and by its members and affiliates.

#### 4.4.4. The role of women

Based on literature reviewed, there is minimal conclusive information regarding the role of women in Al Qa'ida, particularly throughout the early years of the organisation. This subject does not appear prominently within the available literature, with only a few sources providing a substantial discussion.<sup>228</sup> The limited coverage of the role of women within Al Qa'ida-related literature may be seen as a function of the limited role envisioned for female *Jihadists* within the organisation, but also a sign of an existing gap in available data and in the current understandings of this topic by the research community.

Sjøberg Aasgaard (2017) put forward an analysis of Al Qa'ida's approach and conceptualisation of women's roles within the organisation.<sup>229</sup> Through a qualitative review of Al Qa'ida's ideological writings, this study understands the main role of women within Al Qa'ida to be that of a 'virtuous housewife'. Women are expected to support and encourage their husbands in pursuit of *jihad*, and to raise their children to fight for the same cause in the future. This is seen as an important role for achieving the organisation's objectives.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Government Exhibit 1677-T (N.d.).

<sup>225</sup> Naji (2016); Government Exhibit 1677-T (N.d.).

<sup>226</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>227</sup> Naji (2016).

<sup>228</sup> Aasgaard (2017).

<sup>229</sup> Aasgaard (2017).

<sup>230</sup> Lahoud (2012); Aasgaard (2017).

Despite the minimal discussion around the role of women included in Al Qa'ida's formal writings, examples are discussed in the literature of women taking on a greater role than normally envisioned, particularly in the context of regional affiliate organisations. For example, women were employed to conduct suicide attacks under the command of Abu Mu'sab Al Zarqawi in Iraq during times when the AQI had been weakened by US and Iraqi forces offensives.<sup>231</sup> This indicates that while Al Qa'ida's ideology originally prevents women from adopting a combat role, at the operational level the organisation is willing to adapt to local requirements in order to support its broader objectives.<sup>232</sup>

Overall, based on the literature available, it appears that women play a minor formal role in the context of Al Qa'ida's strategy and operations. Al Qa'ida writings emphasise that *jihad* and operative combat roles are primarily matters pertaining to men.<sup>233</sup> This perspective, however, originates mostly from a limited analysis of a sample of writings retrieved from Al Qa'ida's Central leadership. Further analysis of the role that women have played throughout the history of Al Qa'ida and its different affiliate groups is missing in the existing literature.

Box 4.1 provides an overview of the key findings of this chapter.

#### Box 4.1 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's strategy

- No clear consensus exists among scholars concerning Al Qa'ida's strategic timelines and short- to medium-term objectives. Equally, no organisation-sanctioned conceptualisation of Al Qa'ida's historical trajectory and strategy currently exists.
- Overall, there is no comprehensive understanding of Al Qa'ida's strategic objectives and of the ways in which different goals are prioritised and pursued. An analysis of Al Qa'ida's activities over the years suggests that the organisation has balanced different priorities in response to opportunities and developments on the ground, seeking both to hurt its enemies and to establish a territorial presence and foothold.
- Al Qa'ida's strategic shifts reflect the presence within the organisation of different factions advocating for the use of different operational approaches and the pursuit of different objectives. For instance, a review of available internal communication among leaders suggests internal disputes regarding the targeting approach to be adopted by the organisation.
- Training camps have played a significant role in the history of the organisation, and particularly during its early years in the formation of a cadre of members and supporters. Limited information is available regarding current Al Qa'ida training practices and facilities, and these appear to be primarily the concern of local and regional chapters, rather than an element of Al Qa'ida Central's work. Further, literature reviewed suggests that middle managers have historically played a key role in Al Qa'ida's training strategy, largely by connecting potential recruits, particularly those from Western countries, to Al Qa'ida training facilities, supporting the organisation's global reach.
- Propaganda has played and plays a pivotal role in the context of Al Qa'ida, facilitating the recruitment of *Jihadists* across the globe and boosting the organisation's ranks.
- Limited conclusive information is available with regard to the role of women in Al Qa'ida. Sources of limited primary data available suggest that women are expected to support and encourage their husbands in pursuit of *jihad*, and to raise their children to fight for the same cause in the future.

<sup>231</sup> Aasgaard (2017).

<sup>232</sup> Aasgaard (2017).

<sup>233</sup> Aasgaard (2017).

## 5. Al Qa'ida's organisation

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This chapter presents an overview of the state-of-the-art knowledge discerned from the literature concerning Al Qa'ida's organisation, as well as an overview of the main themes and debates characterising existing literature on this subject. The chapter focuses on the evolution and changes observed within Al Qa'ida's organisational structure over the years, and concludes with a discussion of some of the available data concerning the different types of affiliation and relations characterising the interaction between Al Qa'ida Central and some of its affiliates. The findings and material presented in this chapter offer perspectives on Al Qa'ida's organisation as a basis for validating, challenging or expanding the state of current knowledge.

### 5.1. Organisational approach from the organisation's foundation to the 9/11 attacks

Al Qa'ida first emerged in Afghanistan following the end of the anti-Soviet conflict.<sup>234</sup> The existing evidence suggests that in its early years, Al Qa'ida was based on a tight, hierarchical and rules-based structure.<sup>235</sup> Bin Laden and his associates are reported to have established undisputed leadership positions within Al Qa'ida's organisational structure by 1999.<sup>236</sup> The organisation at this time functioned as a close hierarchy, although it relied on a globally dispersed network for the execution of its operations against the West and for its recruitment.<sup>237</sup> This structure involved a clear division of responsibility with centralised control, and is known to have included various committees, an advisory council (comprised of Bin Laden's inner circle) and a mobilisation committee.<sup>238</sup> A number of sources provide more detailed information on this structure and understand it to have included intelligence, military, financial, political and propaganda committees.<sup>239</sup>

Intelligence gathered for the US National Report on Terrorist Attacks suggests that, in the years leading to the 9/11 attacks, Al Qa'ida's global operations were delegated to field commanders with a high degree of autonomy.<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, Al Qa'ida remained a hierarchical organisation with a physical base in

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<sup>234</sup> Brown (2007); Arosoaie (2015); Kamolnick (2017).

<sup>235</sup> Brown (2007); Jones (2014).

<sup>236</sup> National Report on Terrorist Attacks (2004).

<sup>237</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); National Report on Terrorist Attacks (2004).

<sup>238</sup> Brown (2007); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>239</sup> Sources that provide a particularly detailed account of these committees and their respective responsibilities include: National Report on Terrorist Attacks (2004); Brown (2007); Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Jones (2014) and Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>240</sup> National Report on Terrorist Attacks (2004).

Afghanistan, from which the centralised command controlled the organisation's activities. Al Qa'ida's alliance with the Taliban provided it with relative security, which it was able to exploit to strengthen internal capabilities, recruit fighters and disseminate its anti-American narrative.<sup>241</sup> This, however, created vulnerabilities; the physical central headquarters and training camps provided a clear target during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, which enabled US forces to significantly degrade Al Qa'ida's organisation and capacity following 9/11.<sup>242</sup>

## 5.2. Organisational changes following the US invasion of Afghanistan

Evidence presented in the available literature indicates that in the years following the US-led offensive in Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida's organisational capacity had been eroded.<sup>243</sup> The organisation was forced to relocate in part to what was then known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, where it did not enjoy the same stable presence and safety it had enjoyed in Afghanistan, despite reportedly having direct connection to and support from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).<sup>244</sup> Data contained in Fadil Harun's memoir suggest in particular that the organisation faced organisational and capacity setbacks in the aftermath of the killings and arrests of several of its cadre members in the years between 2001 and 2003.<sup>245</sup>

In addition to Pakistan, Iran also reportedly played a pivotal role in facilitating the transit of Al Qa'ida fighters and of their families out of Afghanistan in the wake of the US invasion and bombing campaign. Recent research conducted by Levy and Scott-Clark (2017) indicates that members of the so-called Iranian deep state and of the Quds Forces organised the safe passage out of Afghanistan of hundreds of Al Qa'ida members and of their families, including close members of Osama Bin Laden's family. This was possible not least because of earlier engagements and connections that high-level Al Qa'ida officials, such as Mahfouz Ibn El Waleed, had started developing with Iranian officials as early as 1995 during the search for military support for Al Qa'ida activities.<sup>246</sup> In this regard, while both Levy and Scott-Clark (2017) and Lahoud (2012) shed significant light on the connections and interactions between Al Qa'ida and authorities in Iran and Pakistan in the years preceding and following 9/11, a significant gap in knowledge and understanding of how such collaborations developed and were managed over the years still persists.

Adapting to the organisation's new strategic realities stemming from the downfall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan required a change to Al Qa'ida's structure. During this period, the literature broadly identifies a shift in the organisation from a tightly controlled hierarchy to a more dispersed, networked organisation with a loose centralised control.<sup>247</sup> During this period, Al Qa'ida sought to establish itself as a 'brand' for

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<sup>241</sup> Brown (2007); Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>242</sup> Brown (2007); Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>243</sup> Brown (2007); Turner (2015); Novenario (2016).

<sup>244</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2012); Lahoud (2012).

<sup>245</sup> Lahoud (2012).

<sup>246</sup> Levy & Scott-Clark (2017).

<sup>247</sup> Johnston et al. (2016).

inspiring *jihad* across the globe.<sup>248</sup> In addition to its propaganda,<sup>249</sup> expansion of the organisation's affiliate network is understood to have been the key tool pursued by Al Qa'ida for achieving this and ensuring that it retained a global presence. It is in the context of these changes that the leadership based in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan came to be known as Al Qa'ida Central or Al Qa'ida Core, to differentiate it from its official and quasi-official regional affiliates scattered throughout the globe.<sup>250</sup>

Ensuring Al Qa'ida's survival and longevity in the face of new threats is said to have required Bin Laden to sacrifice a degree of control over the wider organisation. There are reports in the literature that Bin Laden was reluctant to relinquish this degree of control. For example, Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018) state that the core organisation was unwilling to accept proposed actions that would excessively diminish their influence over the wider organisation.<sup>251</sup> Other sources reinforce this analysis, for example through correspondence indicating that Bin Laden was unhappy with the solitary attacks conducted by affiliate cells and inspired by Al Qa'ida publications. In Bin Laden's view, the actions of relatively autonomous affiliates posed a risk to Al Qa'ida's overarching global *jihadi* agenda, and to the overarching control and strategic guidance that Al Qa'ida Central was trying to exert on like-minded and affiliate groups.<sup>252</sup> In his autobiography, Fadil Harun argues that Al Qa'ida Central should not be considered responsible for the proliferation of *Jihadist* groups across the globe, and that with the exception of Iraq, Al Qa'ida Central played no significant role in the establishment and management of the affiliation process for other regional chapters.<sup>253</sup>

Furthermore, an analysis of the literature suggests that internal disputes occurred within Al Qa'ida Central during the reorganisation of the group and its structure. One dispute identified by Brown (2007) centred on disagreement over Al Qa'ida's role as an insurgent military organisation, or as a global brand.<sup>254</sup> There is also evidence of disagreements between Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri, drawn from primary sources such as internal correspondence retrieved from the Bin Laden Bookshelf. Both individuals appeared to hold different opinions regarding the strategic direction of Al Qa'ida following 9/11; while Bin Laden continued to prioritise the US mainland as Al Qa'ida's primary target, Al Zawahiri expressed a preference for focusing operations on US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>255</sup> Some sources suggest that these divisions within Al Qa'ida's leadership have contributed to the organisation's eroded organisational capacity.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Brown (2007); Byman (2012); Lahoud et al. (2012); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>249</sup> Brown (2007); Byman (2012).

<sup>250</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Johnston et al. (2016).

<sup>251</sup> Brown (2007); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>252</sup> Sivek (2013).

<sup>253</sup> Lahoud (2012).

<sup>254</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>255</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>256</sup> Brown (2007).

### 5.2.1. Core functional roles within Al Qa'ida Central

Within the literature, a number of sources provide a detailed account of the formal roles within Al Qa'ida Central.<sup>257</sup> There is a broad consensus on these roles, based on analysis of primary sources, such as founding documents retrieved from the Bin Laden Bookshelf.<sup>258</sup> The organisational structure of core Al Qa'ida is understood to entail: an Emir; a Deputy; a Secretary; a Command council; and a number of different committees with a clear division of responsibility.<sup>259</sup>

Primary sources – such as founding documents and internal correspondence – set out roles for each functional component of Al Qa'ida's internal organisation:

1. The Emir (currently Ayman Al Zawahiri) is the ultimate authority within Al Qa'ida, and is responsible for high-level strategic decisions and the appointment of members of the core leadership.<sup>260</sup>
2. The Deputy is the Emir's second-in command.<sup>261</sup>
3. The Secretary is responsible for carrying out secretarial duties for the Emir, such as organising his schedule.<sup>262</sup>
4. The Command Council is the ultimate decision-making body within Al Qa'ida, whose members are nominated by the Emir. This council is considered the highest decision-making body in the organisation.<sup>263</sup>

The remainder of Al Qa'ida's committee structure is reportedly comprised of a military committee, a political committee, a media committee, an administrative and financial committee, a security committee and a religious committee.<sup>264</sup> While Al Qa'ida's founding documents and early correspondence have provided clear information on the original structure, there is little to no evidence on the extent to which this structure remains intact today, following the organisation's strategic and organisational shifts.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature suggests that Al Qa'ida's internal structure is replicated across its regional affiliates. It is suggested that affiliates tend to adopt this structure as part of the affiliation process leading to their connection with Al Qa'ida Central.<sup>265</sup> However, the internal structure of Al Qa'ida's affiliates is not subject to in-depth examination within the literature, and is only mentioned by limited sources; therefore, it is difficult to make concrete assertions on this topic, particularly given the changing nature of Al Qa'ida Central's influence over its affiliates.

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<sup>257</sup> These sources include: National Report on Terrorist Attacks (2004); Brown (2007); Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Jones (2014); Johnston et al. (2016) and Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>258</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>259</sup> Johnston et al. (2016).

<sup>260</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>261</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>262</sup> Johnston et al. (2016); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>263</sup> Johnston et al. (2016); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>264</sup> Johnston et al. (2016); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>265</sup> Johnston et al. (2016).

### 5.3. Implications of Al Qa'ida's networked approach

As mentioned in the opening sections of this chapter, Al Qa'ida's losses of physical infrastructure and reduced organisational capacity – caused not least by the elimination of several key members of its leadership – led to significant organisational changes.<sup>266</sup> Having been displaced from its central base in Afghanistan, the organisation was forced to relocate to Pakistan.<sup>267</sup> In its new location in the FATA, Al Qa'ida Central reportedly experienced challenges in avoiding apprehension, while also working to regenerate and recover from its losses, which limited its ability to plan and orchestrate attacks.<sup>268</sup> In response to these challenges, Al Qa'ida began to expand its network of global affiliates, shifting towards a distributed network approach supported by globally distributed affiliates, broadly united under Al Qa'ida's ideology and strategic guidance.<sup>269</sup> This decentralisation has given way to claims that Al Qa'ida has declined as an organisation, while others view this new adapted structure as evidence of Al Qa'ida's continued resilience.<sup>270</sup>

The existing literature provides a relatively clear account of Al Qa'ida's gradual shift towards a more globally networked organisation, which is often framed in terms of adaptation. This 'localisation drive' is understood to have fully begun in 2003, after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan had severely eroded the core organisation and its supporting infrastructure.<sup>271</sup> The expansion of Al Qa'ida's affiliates began with the establishment of AQAP in 2003, followed by the formation of an Al Qa'ida branch in Iraq in 2004, then known as Tawhid wal-Jihad (TWJ).<sup>272</sup> Other groups who have since pledged allegiance to Al Qa'ida include, but are not limited to, Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jabhat Al Nusra, Al Shabaab and, most recently, Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).<sup>273</sup> With the exception of AQAP, the majority of Al Qa'ida's new affiliates were pre-existing groups who, driven by factors such as ideological similarity, prestige and material support, pledged allegiance to the larger organisation.<sup>274</sup>

Through its global network, Al Qa'ida was and is able to maintain a presence in most countries that have experienced instability and an erosion of governance in recent years.<sup>275</sup> Multiple sources highlight the importance of physical territory to Al Qa'ida's operations;<sup>276</sup> it is suggested that the networked approach has enabled the organisation to establish distributed territorial footholds in countries across North Africa, as well as Yemen, Somalia and within the Indian Subcontinent, from which it can carry out its operations.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Gohel (2017).

<sup>267</sup> Aaron (2008); Stenersen (2017).

<sup>268</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>269</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>270</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Hoffman (2013); Novenario (2016).

<sup>271</sup> Mendelsohn (2018).

<sup>272</sup> Mendelsohn (2018).

<sup>273</sup> Jones (2014); Novenario (2016); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018). It should be noted that the affiliation of some of these groups varies in nature and formality, and in some cases the affiliation has since ended.

<sup>274</sup> Hoffman (2013); Johnston et al. (2016).

<sup>275</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>276</sup> See: Riedel (2010); Collins (2012); Hoffman (2013); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>277</sup> Hoffman (2013).



Yet the extent to which this presence is effective is disputed in the literature; for example, Brown (2007) suggests that Al Qa'ida failed to adequately capitalise on the opportunities offered by limited governance and failing states, while Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018) refer to the organisation's 'strategic ingenuity' in exploiting the instability caused by the unrest that occurred throughout the Arab world in the early 2010s.<sup>278</sup>

Al Qa'ida's shift towards a networked approach is widely understood to have been driven by a need to adapt. Adaptation is seen as the main rationale behind Al Qa'ida's new organisational structure and approach by most scholars; many authors perceive Al Qa'ida's shift towards a globalised, networked approach as a deliberate choice designed to ensure its survival in the face of new strategic realities. Hoffman (2013) and Gunaratna and Oreg (2018) for example present Al Qa'ida's networked approach as a deliberate choice required and understood by the leadership as necessary to ensuring its survival and longevity.<sup>279</sup> In some instances, the literature points towards the pivotal role played by some of Al Qa'ida's operatives such as Abu Musab Al Suri in leading the reorganisation of the group. Al Suri reportedly viewed Al Qa'ida's traditional, hierarchical structure as a weakness,<sup>280</sup> and advocated for an organisation in which the core leadership provided only basic guidance to globally distributed cells unified by a common aim and doctrine.<sup>281</sup> Al Suri's influence is reflected in the resulting loose, global terrorist networks linked to Al Qa'ida that emerged in the 2000s, which he saw as ensuring greater resilience and ability to strike the enemy.<sup>282</sup> Other scholars, however, describe Al Qa'ida's organisational shift as less of a deliberate choice and present it as an unintended consequence of the group's reduced organisational capacity.<sup>283</sup> For example, according to Hellmich (2014), the erosion of Al Qa'ida's organisational capacity led to the fragmentation and localisation of the organisation's mission through an increased regional focus on affiliate groups such as AQIM.<sup>284</sup> It is also worth noting that the revolution and advancements that characterised communication and information technology between the 1990s and the 2010s should be taken into consideration as explaining factors contributing to the networked and decentralised structure that characterise the latter years of the organisation's trajectory.

The existing research does not provide a clear consensus regarding the degree of control that Al Qa'ida Central exercises over its regional affiliates, although a review of the literature suggests that Al Qa'ida's affiliates enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in their operations, and generally carry out most decisions pertaining to their theatres of operations independently. The degree of oversight held by Al Qa'ida appears to also vary according to the affiliate.<sup>285</sup>

Overall, the literature broadly depicts Al Qa'ida's networks as largely autonomous, and subject to only high-level strategic guidance from the central leadership. Al Qa'ida's senior leadership is not seen to have oversight

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<sup>278</sup> Brown (2007); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>279</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>280</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>281</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>282</sup> Arosoaie (2015).

<sup>283</sup> Hellmich (2014).

<sup>284</sup> Hellmich (2014).

<sup>285</sup> Byman (2012).

of day-to-day operations of its affiliates and its own cells globally; its network has been described as a bottom-up organisation, with soldiers and lower-rank commanders able to operate on a local level with minimal bureaucratic hindrance from the core organisation.<sup>286</sup> However, a limited number of sources have identified some general rules. For example, affiliates are expected to seek guidance from Al Qa'ida Central regarding large-scale attacks, attacks against new targets, and use of new tactics.<sup>287</sup>

Other scholars, however, such as Gunaratna and Oreg (2010), perceive a closer level of oversight from the central organisation and portray affiliates as seeking advice, direction and approval for their proposed operations. They argue that Al Qa'ida Central controls most of the operational activity of its global network.<sup>288</sup> It should be noted that this analysis was conducted prior to Bin Laden's death, and therefore may not accurately reflect the dynamics between Al Qa'ida Central and its affiliates as they stand today. Other sources do, however, provide evidence of Al Qa'ida Central retaining close guidance of its affiliates under Al Zawahiri; Rudner (2013) notes that Al Zawahiri has in the past issued direct orders to affiliated groups to mount terror attacks, indicating the capacity to retain a high degree of operational control.<sup>289</sup>

Guidelines and instructions issued by Al Qa'ida Central are designed to ensure that Al Qa'ida's brand, image and strategic direction are upheld, although the extent to which these guidelines are adhered to by the affiliates does vary.<sup>290</sup> For example, disputes between Al Qa'ida Central and AQI in the early years of the existence of this affiliate group stemmed from the latter's failure to heed commands from the core leadership on key strategic issues (including for instance issues pertaining to targeting civilians of minority groups). This example highlights tensions in the relationships between the central organisation and its affiliates, and provides an example of the red lines that the core organisation is not willing to accept regarding the autonomy and conduct of its affiliates.<sup>291</sup>

### 5.3.1. Challenges associated with Al Qa'ida's networked affiliate structure

Al Qa'ida's increasingly decentralised network of affiliates is held by many as the reason for the organisation's continued survival, providing it with the ability to adapt and remain resilient in the face of new challenges to its core organisation.<sup>292</sup> The affiliate relationship between Al Qa'ida Central and its affiliated groups can also be understood to be one of mutual benefit, with Al Qa'ida capitalising on opportunities to expand its network in areas with high levels of dissent amongst the Muslim population. Al Qa'ida seeks affiliates in regions where it perceives that Muslims are under attack or threatened by Western powers or un-Islamic regimes, harnessing instability to its own ends;<sup>293</sup> in return, affiliate groups benefit

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<sup>286</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>287</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>288</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>289</sup> Rudner (2013).

<sup>290</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>291</sup> Lahoud (2012).

<sup>292</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Hoffman (2013); Gartenstein Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>293</sup> Byman (2012).

from their association with Al Qa'ida's brand, and the strategic and logistical support that the larger organisation is able to offer.<sup>294</sup>

However, the literature also points to a number of challenges that this distributed organisational structure poses to Al Qa'ida Central's influence, global narrative and overarching strategy. For example, Byman (2012) suggests that the more affiliates Al Qa'ida adds to its network, the more insecure this network becomes, due to its vast size and increasing number of outsiders, which makes it difficult for the central organisation to ensure strong operational security.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, natural tensions arise regarding the local vs global focus of affiliates; in their very nature, affiliates are likely to prioritise local agendas, which risks disrupting Al Qa'ida's global strategy.<sup>296</sup> On the other hand, imposing an overly global agenda is likely to alienate local affiliates.<sup>297</sup> Finally, semi-autonomous affiliate groups raise challenges pertaining to Al Qa'ida's global brand and strategic focus; this is best highlighted by the experience of AQI during the Iraq civil war, whose divergence from the core leadership's guidance is seen to have tarnished Al Qa'ida's image.<sup>298</sup> Concerns of Al Qa'ida's top leadership members with regard to Al Qa'ida in Iraq and the aggressiveness of some of its strategies and tactics are documented both in Harun Fadil's autobiography and in a recent study by Fishman (2016). In his text, Harun acknowledges Al Qa'ida in Iraq as the only group whose pledge of allegiance has been accepted by Bin Laden, but equally emphasises the problematic nature and behaviour adopted by this branch, particularly as regards its perceived political immaturity and indiscriminate tactics.<sup>299</sup> As for other groups, such as Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, Harun is sceptical of the degree of actual affiliation and engagement between these and Al Qa'ida Central.<sup>300</sup>

While detailed information on some of Al Qa'ida's affiliates is sparse, the existing literature does provide basic information on a number of known affiliates. Boxes 5.1 to 5.7 provide a brief narrative overview of the relationships and trajectory that different affiliate groups enjoyed during their existence.

### Box 5.1 The Egyptian Islamic Jihad

The **Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ)** is a long-established organisation that emerged in Egypt in the 1970s, and became formally affiliated with Al Qa'ida in 2001. This affiliation is understood to have been largely driven by a series of arrests and financial struggles, for which Al Qa'ida was able to provide assistance.<sup>301</sup> Al Zawahiri is known to have had a historical relationship with the EIJ, having been a strong supporter of the group's revolutionary *jihad* in Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>302</sup> Al Zawahiri eventually aligned with Bin Laden following a series of struggles for the EIJ in Egypt, and his faction of the EIJ was effectively merged with Al Qa'ida in 2001.<sup>303</sup> The writings of EIJ leader and

<sup>294</sup> Riedel (2010).

<sup>295</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>296</sup> Collins (2012); Hellmich (2014).

<sup>297</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>298</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018); Fishman (2016).

<sup>299</sup> Lahoud (2012).

<sup>300</sup> Lahoud (2012).

<sup>301</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>302</sup> Stenersen (2017).

<sup>303</sup> Byman (2012); Stenersen (2017).

theologian Al Sharif are said to have been influential within Al Qa'ida, and have been taught at the latter's training camps.<sup>304</sup> The EIJ is subject to minimal examination within the literature, receiving only few mentions; with no sources providing any substantial research into the activities of this affiliate or its relationship with Al Qa'ida Central.<sup>305</sup>

## Box 5.2 Al Qa'ida in Iraq

**Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI, then ISIL/ISIS, now known as IS)** is perhaps Al Qa'ida's most well-known (former) affiliate, and is also the one most heavily discussed within the literature. ISIS provides a clear example of the consequences of strategic and ideological differences that can exist between core Al Qa'ida and its affiliate groups. AQI became formally affiliated with Al Qa'ida in 2004, and Bin Laden appointed Al Zarqawi as the group's leader. However, disputes between the two groups soon began to emerge particularly as regards issues of targeting minorities and civilians from other confessions (e.g. Shia Muslims), and concerning the use of violence; there is evidence of Al Zawahiri attempting to reason with Al Zarqawi, although this ultimately proved unsuccessful.<sup>306</sup> The strategic disputes between Al Qa'ida and AQI have largely been centred on issues such as the permissible use of violence against Shiites and other minority groups (with AQI/ISIS favouring a less restrained, more indiscriminate approach), and conflicting priorities regarding the focus on the near or far enemy.<sup>307</sup> ISIS is depicted as far more focused on the near enemy, and is concerned with establishing the caliphate as a first priority.<sup>308</sup> While affiliated with Al Qa'ida, correspondence revealed that the central leadership viewed AQI as having tarnished Al Qa'ida's global brand, due to its indiscriminate use of violence in Iraq and failure to gain popular support, which led to its capabilities being significantly depleted by US forces.<sup>309</sup> Abbottabad documents reveal that Al Zarqawi was warned by the core leadership about not only AQI's use of indiscriminate killing, but also its inability to consult the core leadership on strategic matters.<sup>310</sup> AQI's failure to adhere to the agenda and ideology of Al Qa'ida core influenced Bin Laden's subsequent guidelines to its affiliates, in which Bin Laden emphasised that groups such as AQAP should be wary of making the same mistakes.<sup>311</sup>

AQI officially split from Al Qa'ida in 2013 and rebranded itself as the Islamic State.<sup>312</sup> The long-standing disconnect between core Al Qa'ida and AQI/ISIS is highlighted by a letter from Al Zawahiri that was made public in June 2013. This letter revealed that AQI had been operating independently of Al Zawahiri's instructions, and that Al Zawahiri had not been personally informed of the creation of the Islamic State, only learning of it through the mainstream media.<sup>313</sup>

As the successor of AQI, ISIS/ISIL is noted to have continued organisational, management and financial practices inherited from Al Qa'ida.<sup>314</sup> Since its split from Al Qa'ida, evidence indicates that the Islamic State internal organisation is tightly hierarchical, closely mirroring that of core Al Qa'ida's in its pre-9/11 period in Afghanistan. Johnston et al. (2016) suggest two possible reasons for this: first, this could be a natural result of the fact that many of the Islamic State founders who were indoctrinated and trained by Al Qa'ida have subsequently kept to this approach; second, the Islamic State hierarchical structure may be a natural product of its strategic environment – in a context of a territorial-focused insurgency, any rebel groups may be drawn to the security and resources provided by a hierarchical organisation.<sup>315</sup>

Analyses of the recent relationship between the two groups suggests that Al Qa'ida and the Islamic State are engaged in an 'outbidding war' with one another, with both groups competing for the dominant position within the global

<sup>304</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>305</sup> EIJ receives mention in: Byman (2012); Gohel (2017); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018); Stenersen (2017).

<sup>306</sup> Aaron (2008).

<sup>307</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>308</sup> Novenario (2016).

<sup>309</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>310</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>311</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>312</sup> Cragin (2017).

<sup>313</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>314</sup> Johnston et al. (2016).

<sup>315</sup> Johnston et al. (2016).

jihadi movement.<sup>316</sup> There are varying understandings of Al Qa'ida's relative position within this competition, although there is a general consensus that its former affiliate has posed a significant challenge for Al Qa'ida, disrupting its regional growth and recruitment, and has altered the strategic environment in which it must operate.<sup>317</sup>

### Box 5.3 Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula

**Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)** is subject to more substantial discussion within the literature compared with other groups, and is commonly identified as one of Al Qa'ida's key affiliates.<sup>318</sup> Detailed information on AQAP is provided by Ingram's (2017) analysis of the group's use of propaganda,<sup>319</sup> Kamolnick's (2017) discussion of its strategy and modus operandi,<sup>320</sup> and Simcox's (2018) analysis of its ideology and objectives.<sup>321</sup> Since its creation in 2003,<sup>322</sup> AQAP has established a strong presence in Saudi Arabia and in Yemen, and has capitalised on the ongoing conflict in Yemen to secure territory, expand its influence and launch international attacks.<sup>323</sup> Unlike other Al Qa'ida affiliates, this group did not have strong local presence prior to its affiliation with Al Qa'ida's core.<sup>324</sup> Some authors view AQAP to be firmly under the control of core Al Qa'ida.<sup>325</sup> The affiliate is known to have been linked to some of Al Qa'ida's more high-profile attacks in the West in recent years, such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks.<sup>326</sup> The group may therefore be understood to be more closely aligned with core Al Qa'ida's global objectives, although disputes and mistrust can be observed throughout the history of the two groups.<sup>327</sup> For example, sources provide evidence that the relationships between Al Qa'ida's core and AQAP deteriorated in 2010 as AQAP continued to attack local security forces in Yemen, in clear contravention of Bin Laden's instructions.<sup>328</sup> This indicates that, while AQAP is generally seen as an important and closely aligned affiliate for core Al Qa'ida, the group has nevertheless continued to pursue its own local objectives in a way that challenges the control of Al Qa'ida's central leadership. Indeed, documents from the Abbottabad archive show that Bin Laden expressed displeasure with AQAP, who he believed to be overly focused on its local objectives in Yemen, with insufficient support for Al Qa'ida's global agenda.<sup>329</sup>

### Box 5.4 Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb

**Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**, formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), was formed as a splinter of Algeria's Armed Islamic Group in the 1990s, and first formed an alliance with Al Qa'ida in 2003 before formally changing its name in 2007.<sup>330</sup> AQIM has since expanded into Nigeria, where it has pursued a strategy of guerrilla warfare.<sup>331</sup> Bin Laden is said to have sought a closer relationship with AQIM to support his strategy of attrition against the West;<sup>332</sup> the group has supported this strategy through, for example, attacks against

<sup>316</sup> Novenario (2016).

<sup>317</sup> Novenario (2016); Gartenstein Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>318</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>319</sup> Ingram (2017).

<sup>320</sup> Kamolnick (2017).

<sup>321</sup> Simcox (2018).

<sup>322</sup> Mendelsohn (2018).

<sup>323</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>324</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>325</sup> Novenario (2016).

<sup>326</sup> Ingram (2017).

<sup>327</sup> Byman (2012); Kamolnick (2017).

<sup>328</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>329</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>330</sup> Byman (2012); Zenn (2018).

<sup>331</sup> Zenn (2018).

<sup>332</sup> Lahoud et al. (2012).

police stations and Western oil infrastructure.<sup>333</sup> There is suggestion that AQIM has historically held a relatively close relationship with Al Qa'ida Central, with Abbottabad documents indicating that the group has often received direct operational instructions from the central leadership, including from Bin Laden.<sup>334</sup> Much of the available information on AQIM is provided by Zenn (2018), who describes the group's tumultuous relationship with its former ally then IS-affiliate, Boko Haram.<sup>335</sup>

### Box 5.5 Al Shabaab

**Al Shabaab** is depicted within the literature as a relatively independent organisation from Al Qa'ida.<sup>336</sup> The Somali-based organisation publicly stated its allegiance to Al Qa'ida in 2009, before officially declaring its loyalty in 2012.<sup>337</sup> Bin Laden is said to have provided Al Shabaab with financial assistance, and the organisation is also noted to have benefited from its association with the Al Qa'ida brand in Somalia.<sup>338</sup> In addition, Al Shabaab is reported to have received combat training from other members of Al Qa'ida, in areas such as conducting suicide bombings and building improvised explosive devices (IEDs).<sup>339</sup> Despite this operational support, Abbottabad documents reveal that the relationship between Al Shabaab and Bin Laden was characterised by mistrust, and the latter is reported to have disliked Al Shabaab's inflexible administration and poor governance capacity.<sup>340</sup>

### Box 5.6 Jabhat al Nusra and Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham

**Jabhat al Nusra** (now known as Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham) is depicted within the literature as having had a historically close relationship with Al Qa'ida Central, although the two groups are no longer formally affiliated.<sup>341</sup> Al Nusra has been an unusual affiliate who Al Qa'ida has strategically used as a 'front group' to pursue its regional strategy in Syria.<sup>342</sup> Al Nusra played a key role in supporting Al Qa'ida's regional objectives in Syria. Alongside what was then known as ISIL, the group was found to have orchestrated approximately two-thirds of Al Qa'ida's attacks in 2013.<sup>343</sup> Al Zawahiri was reported to have been displeased with Al Nusra in 2013, when the group revealed its ties with Al Qa'ida without permission from the central leadership.<sup>344</sup> Al Nusra played a central role in the dispute between core Al Qa'ida and ISIL that eventually led to the separation of the two groups and the formation of the Islamic State. Within the existing literature, this topic is the focus of most of the discussions around Al Nusra.<sup>345</sup> ISIL attempted to absorb Al Nusra, whose rejection of this merger was seconded by Al Zawahiri, as part of a series of events that led to the separation and formation of ISIS.<sup>346</sup> In 2016, Al Nusra formally terminated its affiliation from Al Qa'ida in what appears to have been an orchestrated move.<sup>347</sup> Al Qa'ida is reported to have approved this separation, as removing its Al Qa'ida affiliation would enable Al Nusra to form closer ties with other Islamist groups in Syria to support its fight against the Assad regime.<sup>348</sup> In this regard, the separation was based on practicalities and public relations, rather than any ideological or strategic conflict and disagreement. Al Zawahiri's deputies helped to de-

<sup>333</sup> Riedel (2010).

<sup>334</sup> Roggio (2017).

<sup>335</sup> Zenn (2018).

<sup>336</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>337</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>338</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>339</sup> Byman (2012).

<sup>340</sup> Lahoud (2012); Gartnerstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>341</sup> Gohel (2017); Gartnerstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>342</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>343</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>344</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>345</sup> See, for example: Cragin (2017); Gartnerstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>346</sup> Cragin (2017).

<sup>347</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>348</sup> Gohel (2017).

formalise the uncoupling of the two groups, and Al Nusra has since rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah Al Sham (Front for the Conquest of Syria).<sup>349</sup> More recently, Jabhat Fatah Al Sham merged with Ahrar al Sham to become Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or the 'Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant'.<sup>350</sup> This Syrian organisation is now known as a locally focused terrorist organisation that retains a Salafi-Jihadist ideology, although it no longer has formal ties with Al Qa'ida.<sup>351</sup>

### Box 5.7 Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent

**Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)** is Al Qa'ida's newest affiliate, and was formally established in September 2014. The group is known to have established a foothold in parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and is understood to pose a growing threat in other countries in the region, such as India and Bangladesh.<sup>352</sup> Novenario (2016) depicts the rationale behind the establishment of this regional branch as twofold: first, as an attempt to establish an arena for *jihad* in South Asia; and second, as a demonstration of force against the Islamic State.<sup>353</sup> The former point appears to reflect the assertion of Jones (2014) that the core leadership remains in pursuit of a regional caliphate encompassing South Asia and stretching to Southern Europe.<sup>354</sup> This indicates that securing a formal presence in this region through AQIS may be part of Al Qa'ida's wider territorial strategy. Similar to Jones' latter point, Holbrook (2015) suggests that the establishment of AQIS was part of Al Qa'ida's two-pronged communications strategy designed to highlight its continued relevance following the emergence of ISIS.<sup>355</sup> Holbrook (2015) understands the establishment of AQIS as (i) a demonstration of Al Qa'ida's sustained global presence; and (ii) an organisation that is attuned to the individual needs of local Muslim populations.<sup>356</sup> AQIS is understood to have established a presence across Pakistan and Afghanistan, in Pakistan's port city of Karachi and the Helmand province in Afghanistan.<sup>357</sup> This regional presence forms part of a logistical thread through which AQIS can transfer fighters, funds and communications through to the Taliban in Quetta, as well as gaining access into the southern provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>358</sup> The strategic importance of Al Qa'ida's newest affiliate is highlighted by evidence that it remains a focus for the core leadership – for example, Gohel (2017) suggests that Al Zawahiri is seeking to strengthen AQIS through the core organisation's relationship with the Taliban.<sup>359</sup> Aside from this information, the existing literature provides minimal detail on the activities, operations or internal organisation of AQIS; while the establishment of this affiliate can be understood to support Al Qa'ida's regional goals, the nature of the relationship between AQIS and core Al Qa'ida is unclear.

### 5.3.2. Debates over the continued relevance and influence of Al Qa'ida Central

Finally, it is during the period following Bin Laden's death that available sources appear to differ most in their understandings of Al Qa'ida's organisational structure and its capacity, as well as the role of its organisational core. The literature is in broad agreement that Al Qa'ida's tight control over its global operations was loosened; however, disagreements emerge regarding the extent to which this control was eroded. Some authors view the core organisation as significantly depleted in its capabilities and its control over its global network and, as a result, the strategic direction of the organisation as a whole.<sup>360</sup> Others point

<sup>349</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>350</sup> Newlee (2018).

<sup>351</sup> Newlee (2018).

<sup>352</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>353</sup> Novenario (2016).

<sup>354</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>355</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>356</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>357</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>358</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>359</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>360</sup> Brown (2007); Gunaratna & Oreg (2010); Arosoaie (2015); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

to evidence indicating that Al Qa'ida retains a relatively high degree of control over many of its affiliates, and that its core capabilities are not as eroded as they might at first seem.<sup>361</sup> This lack of consensus suggests that there is no clear picture of the full extent of Al Qa'ida Central's influence over its affiliates.

A number of sources indicate that, in the years prior to Bin Laden's death, Al Qa'ida Central exercised a relatively high degree of control over its affiliates, although there is evidence that Bin Laden was wary of the potential loss of control associated with a distributed network of regional cells.<sup>362</sup> Documents retrieved from the Bin Laden Archive indicate that affiliate groups were initially responsive to Bin Laden on the most important and pressing issues, such as those regarding strategy or personnel and leadership appointments.<sup>363</sup> Hoffman (2013) suggests that the extent of Bin Laden's influence is illustrated by his ability to block both the promotion of Anwar al-Awlaqi within AQAP, and the formalisation of relations between Al Shabaab with Al Qa'ida.<sup>364</sup> Equally, other scholars emphasise some of the coordination and oversight shortcomings emerging from Al Qa'ida Central's work. For instance, Collins (2012) highlights the dispute between Al Qa'ida Central and AQAP after AQAP disregarded Bin Laden's guidance by continuing to attack local security forces and hold territory in Yemen.<sup>365</sup> Hellmich (2014) similarly argues that Al Qa'ida Central exerts minimal influence over its affiliates, noting the increasingly localised focus of groups such as AQIM and AQAP.<sup>366</sup> It should be noted, however, that as Al Qa'ida did not originally establish any of its affiliate franchises, it is expected that these independent entities would not necessarily align with all of the core organisation's objectives and dictates.<sup>367</sup> Finally, Harun Fadil's autobiography supports the views put forward by scholars questioning the strength of influence stemming from Al Qa'ida Central, describing it as a marginalised entity with limited to no ability to engage, let alone influence, so-called affiliate groups.<sup>368</sup>

There is general agreement within the literature that the organisational and coordination capacity of Al Qa'ida Central was weakened by Bin Laden's death,<sup>369</sup> although sources differ on the extent and nature of this. A number of sources point to evidence suggesting that Al Qa'ida Central's influence over the affiliates has declined since the death of Bin Laden. For example, Brown (2007) understands the organisational core to have eroded, with the central organisation now having a purely 'branding' function; with a global network that pledges allegiance not to the core leadership, but to the vision that it embodies.<sup>370</sup> Other authors such as Gohel (2017) and Jones (2014) suggest that the core leadership is significantly diminished, in part due to Al Zawairi's failure to maintain unity amongst Al Qa'ida's affiliates (demonstrated by his inability to mediate the dispute between Jabhat al-Nusrah and AQI),<sup>371</sup> as well as his failure to fully capitalise on the

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<sup>361</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>362</sup> Sivek (2013).

<sup>363</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>364</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>365</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>366</sup> Hellmich (2014).

<sup>367</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>368</sup> Lahoud (2012).

<sup>369</sup> Collins (2012).

<sup>370</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>371</sup> Jones (2014); Gohel (2017).



security vacuum created in Muslim countries by the Arab Spring.<sup>372</sup> Others provide detailed accounts of the dispute between core Al Qa'ida itself and AQI, which ultimately led to the formation of ISIS.<sup>373</sup>

Other sources suggest that the authority of Al Qa'ida core has not eroded as much as it might appear. Hoffman (2013) and Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018), for example, view the core as having retained centralised control.<sup>374</sup> These authors assert that Al Qa'ida remains structured around a centralised command that acts as the decision-making body, while responsibility for executing these decisions is decentralised.<sup>375</sup> Similarly, Gunaratna and Oreg (2010) suggest that Al Qa'ida continues to possess full control over its own operational infrastructure and, consequently, it has also retained control over the activity of its partners and affiliates.<sup>376</sup> In Hoffman's view, Al Qa'ida's top leadership controls the majority of the group's strategic and organisational direction.<sup>377</sup> Hoffman has suggested that the Arab Spring – particularly the continued instability in Syria – has provided the Al Qa'ida brand and, by extension, the core organisation, with new relevance and status that could potentially resuscitate core Al Qa'ida's diminishing capabilities (although this is contingent on a favourable course of events in the country and surrounding region).<sup>378</sup>

#### 5.4. The influence of Al Qa'ida Central over other non-affiliated *Jihadist* groups

Within the available literature, there appears to be a general consensus that Al Qa'ida no longer holds a monopoly over the global *Jihadist* movement and its narrative, and that its influence over other *Jihadist* groups is depleted relative to that of its key competitor, the Islamic State. However, the extent to which this depletion has occurred is the subject to some debate.<sup>379</sup>

Prior to the death of Bin Laden and the establishment of the Islamic State, there appeared to be minimal dispute regarding core Al Qa'ida's hegemonic position within the global *Jihadist* movement. For example, Brown (2007) understood Al Qa'ida to be the dominant actor within this ideological space, due largely to its 'brand appeal'.<sup>380</sup> Similarly, Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018) note that until the early 2010s Al Qa'ida held an 'unrivalled dominance' further perpetuated by a lack of competition from any other *Jihadist* groups.<sup>381</sup>

The literature also indicates that at various stages in its history Al Qa'ida wielded relatively high influence over other, non-formally affiliated groups, such as the Taliban. Notably, Al Qa'ida is found to have enjoyed

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<sup>372</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>373</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>374</sup> Hoffman (2013); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>375</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>376</sup> Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>377</sup> Hoffman (2013), quoted in Neumann et al. (2011).

<sup>378</sup> Hoffman (2013).

<sup>379</sup> See for example Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>380</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>381</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

a close relationship with the Taliban, as evidenced through explicit support stated in various official publications.<sup>382</sup> This ideological partnership is found to not only have enabled Al Qa'ida to expand its regional influence,<sup>383</sup> it also appears to have shaped the Taliban's strategy and tactics.<sup>384</sup> Riedel (2010) highlights one example where Taliban operatives appeared to adopt Al Qa'ida's approach of attrition against the West by launching attempted suicide attacks against a base in which the then-US Vice President was visiting during a trip to Afghanistan.<sup>385</sup> Bin Laden is also reported to have supported the planning of many of the Taliban's operations.<sup>386</sup>

Based on the literature discussed above, Al Qa'ida is widely understood to have enjoyed a historical prominence within the global *jihadi* movement. More recently, however, other *Jihadist* groups have emerged to compete for a share of the ideological marketplace, most notably the Islamic State. The existing literature provides a number of different analyses of the competition between Al Qa'ida and the Islamic State,<sup>387</sup> and it is widely agreed that the Islamic State has posed a significant challenge to Al Qa'ida's global influence and appeal. However, some sources differ in their understanding of the nature of this challenge.

While Al Qa'ida's depleted influence is widely acknowledged, there is some disagreement regarding the extent of this decline. While most depict Al Qa'ida as at a disadvantage to ISIS, others view Al Qa'ida's depleted influence to be overstated. Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018) point to the fact that Al Qa'ida remains a dominant military force in large areas of territory across Syria, as well as wielding significant influence in Yemen.<sup>388</sup> Al Qa'ida has also continued to expand its affiliate networks – for example with the establishment of Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in 2014<sup>389</sup> – demonstrating that the organisation has been able to maintain some of its appeal to other regional groups, despite its weakened organisational capacity and competition from the Islamic State. Mendelsohn (2018) suggests that Al Qa'ida has used the shift in global attention to the Islamic State to its advantage, in order to recuperate; in this sense, it is suggested that Al Qa'ida represents a more dangerous long-term threat.<sup>390</sup> Other sources do not consider this notion in any great detail, indicating a possible gap in current research.

While authors have put forward select, regionally-concentrated examples of Al Qa'ida's continued influence over other *Jihadist* groups, it is evident from the literature that the group's relative influence over the global movement is significantly reduced following the death of Bin Laden and the emergence of the Islamic State. Authors such as Holbrook (2015) point to Al Zawahiri's inability to appeal to regional groups in Egypt,

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<sup>382</sup> Brown (2007); Gunaratna & Oreg (2010).

<sup>383</sup> Gohel (2017).

<sup>384</sup> Brown (2007).

<sup>385</sup> Riedel (2010).

<sup>386</sup> Riedel (2010).

<sup>387</sup> See, for example: Holbrook (2015); Johnston et al. (2016); Watts (2016); Ingram (2017).

<sup>388</sup> Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>389</sup> Holbrook (2015); Gohel (2017); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018).

<sup>390</sup> Mendelsohn (2018).

Libya and South Asia,<sup>391</sup> which have instead aligned themselves with the Islamic State.<sup>392</sup> Some authors suggest that other regional competitors may also have emerged – such as Lashkar-e-Taiba in Afghanistan – however the literature provides few details on this subject.<sup>393</sup>

Box 5.8 provides an overview of the key findings of this chapter.

#### Box 5.8 Overview of key findings concerning Al Qa'ida's organisation

- In its early years, Al Qa'ida was based on a tight, hierarchical and rules-based structure. The organisation functioned as a close hierarchy, even though it relied on a globally dispersed network for the execution of its operations.
- Following the US-led offensive in Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida's organisational capacity was eroded and members of the organisation were forced to relocate to different regions in Pakistan and Iran with support from security and intelligence services in both countries.
- In the context of new strategic realities, Al Qa'ida sought to adapt its organisational model and establish itself as a 'brand', inspiring *jihād* across the globe. Expanding the organisation's affiliate network is understood to have been the main tool pursued by Al Qa'ida to ensure that it retained a global presence and relevance.
- Ensuring Al Qa'ida's survival and longevity in the face of new threats required Bin Laden to relinquish a degree of control over the wider organisation. Indeed, Al Qa'ida began to expand its network of global affiliates, shifting towards a distributed network approach supported by globally distributed affiliates, broadly united under Al Qa'ida's ideology and strategic guidance, but with freedom of action over day-to-day operational and tactical initiatives.
- Overall, the literature broadly depicts Al Qa'ida's networks as largely autonomous, and subject to only high-level strategic guidance from the central leadership. Al Qa'ida's increasingly decentralised network of affiliates is held by many as the reason for the organisation's continued survival, providing it with the ability to adapt and remain resilient in the face of new challenges to its core organisation, although the literature also points to a number of challenges that this distributed organisational structure poses.
- Based on the literature discussed above, Al Qa'ida is widely understood to have enjoyed a historical prominence within the global *jihādī* movement. More recently, however, other *Jihadist* groups have emerged to compete for a share of the ideological marketplace.
- Al Qa'ida no longer holds a monopoly over the global *jihadist* movement and its narrative, and influence over other *Jihadist* groups is depleted relative to that of its key competitor, the Islamic State.

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<sup>391</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>392</sup> Holbrook (2015).

<sup>393</sup> Byman (2012).

## 6. Previous and ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive

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As evidenced by Chapters 2 to 5 of this report, extensive research into Al Qa'ida and the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism has been conducted by scholars and practitioners over the years. A wealth of publications on the organisation has been released, touching on different aspects of its ideology, strategy and organisation. However, such research has only rarely entailed direct access to data collected from members of and affiliates to Al Qa'ida, or to original documentation produced by the organisation other than propaganda outputs. When such sources were available, research relied on small samples of documents or on limited instances of primary data-collection activities.

Expert consultations conducted during Phase I of this study echoed this assessment. Experts consulted emphasised the limited primary data underpinning scholarly knowledge. For instance, scholars consulted highlighted gaps and lamented shortcomings in evidence and data underpinning state-of-the-art knowledge of:

- Al Qa'ida's ideology, the influence of different contemporary scholars and of different schools of thought;<sup>394</sup>
- Al Qa'ida Central's relations with its affiliate groups, the drivers and factors influencing decision-making around official affiliation, and the factors and drivers determining the extent to which different groups may be directed from Al Qa'ida Central and/or independent in their decision-making processes;<sup>395</sup> and
- Al Qa'ida's decision-making approach to balancing global- and local-level strategic, operational and tactical issues and approaches.<sup>396</sup>

### 6.1. The untapped potential of the Bin Laden Archive

In the context of limited primary data and evidence available about Al Qa'ida, the so-called Bin Laden Archive published by the United States CIA in 2017 represents a potentially significant resource, providing access to a large volume of documents originating from or used directly by Al Qa'ida's most senior leadership. As part of Phase I research activities, the study team conducted a systematic search for publications and research focusing on Bin Laden Archive data. The details of the search protocols employed

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<sup>394</sup> RAND Europe interviews (IDs 01; 02).

<sup>395</sup> RAND Europe interviews (IDs 03; 04).

<sup>396</sup> RAND Europe interviews (IDs 02; 03; 04).

are detailed in Annex Annex C of this report. Table 6.1 provides an overview of the overall publications retrieved through the search strategy employed.

**Table 6.1 Overview of results by database and after review and filtering process**

| Database                                                                                   | Publications retrieved |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| JSTOR                                                                                      | 2                      |
| Scopus                                                                                     | 11                     |
| Google Scholar                                                                             | 22                     |
| <b>Results without duplicates and bibliographies or repositories of research resources</b> | <b>30</b>              |

A review of these publications led to the shortlisting of a limited number of studies of relevance to the purpose of Phase I work (i.e. studies that entailed a review and analysis of at least part of the materials included in the Bin Laden Archive or in the so-called ‘Bin Laden Bookshelf’, a previous, incomplete release of the Archive). The majority of publications identified made only limited or passing references acknowledging the existence of the Bin Laden Archive, and did not conduct any analysis of its data. Table 6.2 provides a summary of the relevant publications identified through systematic searches and by engaging with a limited number of experts and scholars.

In all the publications included in Table 6.2, research conducted on data included in the Bin Laden Archive and on the Bin Laden Bookshelf entailed a qualitative review of a limited sample of files and documents. The small number of articles and publications identified and the methodological limitations of endeavours undertaken so far suggest that there is still significant scope for further research and analysis to be conducted on the Bin Laden Archive.

More broadly, any research conducted so far has entailed a qualitative review of a selected number of files and documents. The archive therefore represents an untapped source that could provide researchers with access to insights into under-researched areas relating to Al Qa’ida and its evolution and trajectory over the years. In particular, a systematic review of Bin Laden Archive data, taking advantage of scalable analytics and IT-enhanced research methods, could present opportunities to derive such insights given the large quantity of data contained.

The finding discussed above should be caveated by acknowledging that other research on the Bin Laden Archive and its data may have been conducted or be ongoing outside of the public domain. The study team contacted a number of relevant researchers and organisations inquiring as to ongoing work being conducted on the Archive. Only a limited subset of researchers responded to such inquiries, suggesting that such research may exist or be ongoing in a classified or non-public setting.

**Table 6.2 Qualitative review of selected samples of studies on files found in the Bin Laden archive**

| Publication                               | Synopsis                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Methodology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Subject focus                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Gartenstein-Ross &amp; Barr (2018)</b> | Academics and analysts continue to argue whether Al Qa'ida exists as a top-down, centralised organisation, or whether the organisation has transformed into a decentralised social movement. Through an analysis of the Bin Laden papers, the authors argue that Al Qa'ida has maintained an organisational model that is centralised in its decision-making and decentralised in its execution. The authors argue that this organisational structure is an important factor in the on-going resilience of the organisation. | The authors conduct a qualitative (not computer-assisted) analysis of selected documents within the Bin Laden archive. Neither the number of documents analysed, nor the precise qualitative approach used to examine them, are disclosed in the article. However, the authors do note the types of document examined, which include: minutes from Al Qa'ida meetings; applications from aspiring Al Qa'ida members; selected files from the personnel management system; and letters from Bin Laden and between others within the organisation's chain of command. | This article focuses on two key areas: first, Al Qa'ida's organisational structure; and second, the organisation's central leadership and its strategic trajectory. Relating to this, the authors present two main findings drawn from their analysis of the documents. First, Al Qa'ida retains a (mostly) centralised, yet flexible, organisational structure. Second, Al Qa'ida's central leadership continues to determine and drive the organisation's strategic direction. |
| <b>Grace (2018a)</b>                      | This article investigates Al Qa'ida's understanding and application of psychology, and the psychological issues associated with terrorist activity. It examines Al Qa'ida's analysis of psychological issues and the subsequent ways in which its operatives utilise both religious and secular coping strategies in order to overcome these problems. The psychological issues identified include suicide, depression, anxiety, security stress, diversity stress and enforced idleness.                                    | This study employs a qualitative approach, based on an analysis of 255 documents from Bin Laden's Bookshelf, as well as documents from the Harmony Database. The study also used data analysis methods, which involved importing all documents into a software tool (NVivo Version 11) for two cycles of coding using descriptive, simultaneous and focused coding techniques.                                                                                                                                                                                      | The key focus of this study is on Al Qa'ida recruits. The study focuses on Al Qa'ida's understanding of psychology, and how this knowledge is utilised to support the psychological wellbeing and coping strategies of Al Qa'ida operatives.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Grace (2018b)</b>                      | This article examines the role of revenge ideation in radicalisation and terrorism. The study has two primary objects; first, it seeks to understand the relationship between revenge ideation, group grievance and radicalisation. Second, it examines how Al Qa'ida conceptualises revenge ideation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | This study employs a mixed-methodological approach, through both qualitative and quantitative analysis of primary and secondary data using an explanatory sequential research design. The quantitative research involved a software-aided analysis of data on 152 members of terrorist groups. The qualitative study is based on a review of 52 documents drawn from Bin Laden's bookshelf and the Harmony Database.                                                                                                                                                | This study focuses on the radicalisation of individuals, and Al Qa'ida's recruitment approach. The central concept is that of 'revenge', and the role this plays in Al Qa'ida's strategy and ideology.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

| Publication                 | Synopsis                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Methodology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Subject focus                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lahoud et al. (2012)</b> | This paper seeks to explore and contextualise a small sample of documents from the Bin Laden archive that had been released by the CIA at this time. Due to the limited sample size, the authors do not seek to produce wider conclusions on Al Qa'ida.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | The report provides detailed analysis of 17 declassified documents from the Bin Laden Archive. These documents consist of both electronic and draft letters dated between 2006 and 2011, and amount to 175 pages. The authors note that the report does not represent an exhaustive analysis of the 17 documents.                  | The subject matter of the documents analysed spans three key areas: the relationship between Al Qa'ida and the affiliate groups; ties between Al Qa'ida and Iran and Pakistan; and Bin Laden's strategic plans.                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Collins (2012)</b>       | This article analyses a small selection of documents released from the Bin Laden Archive in 2012. These are used to shed light on the operational security measures advocated by Bin Laden to evade detection by the US. It proceeds to evaluate the likely impact that these measures had on Al Qa'ida's ability to conduct operations, concluding that while these security measures did slow Al Qa'ida's operational planning, they also enabled Bin Laden to evade detection for nearly a decade. | This article represents a qualitative analysis of a number of documents from the Bin Laden archive, selected due to their subject focus on Bin Laden's security measures. The exact sample size used is not specified, nor is the depth of analysis conducted. The documents analysed are primarily letters authored by Bin Laden. | This article focuses on the security measures followed and advocated by Bin Laden, and their relation to the organisation's operational planning.                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Roggio (2017)</b>        | This article reports on the CIA's 2017 release of a large number of files found within the Bin Laden Archive. The article summarises the initial lessons learned from the archive, based on an examination of a small number of documents released.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | This article does not represent a formal study. Rather, the author provides a high-level qualitative summary of a small number of documents, including videos and audio files, Bin Laden's personal journal, and communications between members of the Al Qa'ida network.                                                          | This article identifies a number of initial 'lessons' derived from the files examined, relating to the organisation's control mechanisms and leadership structure; its relations with Iran; its support network in Pakistan; Bin Laden's personal reflections on the 2011 Arab uprisings; and the role of Hamza Bin Laden within the organisation. |

SOURCE: RAND Europe analysis.

## 7. Image analysis

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This chapter provides an overview of the approach taken to analysing the image cluster of the Archive. It opens with a detailed overview of the methodology employed (Section 7.1), before discussing emerging findings and results (Section 7.2), and then summarising conclusions drawn from the study team and informing the responses to Phase II research questions (Section 7.3.).

### 7.1. Image analysis approach and limitations

#### 7.1.1. The Archive's image cluster

The image cluster of the Archive comprises approximately 72,034 image files. Based on their file size, images included in the Archive can be clustered as illustrated in Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1 Archive images distribution by file size.**

| File size               | Number of files |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Less than 50kb          | 55,062 files    |
| Between 51kb and 100kb  | 5,467 files     |
| Between 101kb and 250kb | 5,091 files     |
| Between 251kb and 500kb | 2,205 files     |
| Over 500kb              | 5,209 files     |

Furthermore, within the image cluster of the Archive, it is possible to identify a number of files that – based on their file name – appear to originate directly from devices equipped with a camera that might have been in use at the Abbottabad compound or by associates of those living there. These comprise files whose name starts with the identifiers 'DSC', 'IMG' and 'CIMG', which are common naming conventions used on digital cameras and devices equipped with one. Table 7.2 provides an overview of the available files with these identifiers.



**Table 7.2 Overview of image files appearing to originate from digital cameras and/or devices equipped with one**

| Naming convention | Number of files |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| DSC               | 1,125 files     |
| IMG               | 412 files       |
| CIMG              | 106 files       |

### 7.1.2. Sampling approach

To characterise the cluster and investigate the potential for it to yield relevant new insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research, the study team conducted a human-based analysis of a non-randomised sample of the images included in the Archive. The analysis entailed a review of the images included in the sample, and their categorisation – by one analyst, to ensure consistency – according to a predetermined set of tags. In total 1,500 images were analysed, accounting for approximately 2 per cent of the whole image cluster of the Archive.

The study team considered employing an off-the-shelf solution or an external service provider to conduct a computer-enabled analysis of the Archive image cluster. While the use of machine-learning-enabled services could have enabled an analysis of the image Archive as a whole, this was judged ultimately not to be both feasible and good value for money in the context of the resources available. In light of this – in coordination with WODC and the project SAC – the study team opted for a human-based analysis of a non-randomised sample of the image cluster of the Archive. This choice enabled the study team to conduct its analysis on a limited cluster of the Archive, and also enabled the use of a greater volume of possible tags for categorising images.

In particular, the study team generated a sample comprising 1,500 images, which was equivalent to approximately 2 per cent of the image cluster of the Archive. The sample was not fully randomised, rather precedence was given in building the sample to files whose name suggested that they had been generated by a digital camera or by a device equipped with one. Table 7.3 provides an overview of the parameters employed to generate the sample for image analysis activities. Within each cluster stratum, the study team selected the desired number of files for inclusion in the sample in a randomised manner.

**Table 7.3 Image cluster sample composition**

| File group                                    | Number of files                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DSC                                           | 500 files (approximately 45% of files with this naming convention) |
| IMG                                           | 200 files (approximately 50% of files with this naming convention) |
| CIMG                                          | 50 files (approximately 50% of files with this naming convention)  |
| All image files (including DSC/IMG/CIMG ones) | 750 (approximately 1% of Archive's image cluster)                  |

After the image sample had been assembled, the study team assessed the distribution of image files included in the sample according to their file size. Table 7.4 provides an overview of this distribution according to the same categories presented in Table 7.1.

**Table 7.4 Distribution of images included in the study sample according by file size**

| File size               | Number of files included in Phase II sample |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Less than 50kb          | 681                                         |
| Between 51kb and 100kb  | 159                                         |
| Between 101kb and 250kb | 155                                         |
| Between 251kb and 500kb | 48                                          |
| Over 500kb              | 711                                         |

### 7.1.3. Analytical approach

To analyse the image sample and assess the potential of the broader image cluster of the Archive to yield relevant new insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research, the study team reviewed images included in the sample with a view to categorising them against a pre-identified set of categories.

Table 7.5 provides an overview of the categories employed during the study to categorise individual images included in the sample. The set of categories employed was developed through an iterative approach using both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. The study team first generated a set of categories based on the overarching themes that the study aims to investigate (i.e. Al Qa'ida's ideology, strategy and organisation, and the broader phenomenon of violent Jihadism) and on the expected content of the Archive. The study team then refined the categories from the bottom up by reviewing random samples of images included in the Archive, from different categories and file sizes. This enabled the study team to qualitatively stress-test and refine the categories that had been generated. The volume of categories included in Table 7.4 was also designed so as to ensure the feasibility of delivering the required analysis on the agreed image sample and in light of project resources reserved for this task.

The study team also conducted a targeted literature review to obtain insights into previously employed categorisation approaches for images in the context of terrorism studies. However, no significant examples from the field of terrorism studies – or from relevant adjacent fields that had conducted an image categorisation exercise on Al Qa'ida material akin to the one included in this study – were identified. Instead, a number of publications were identified that discussed theoretical frameworks and approaches for image categorisation efforts on large data sets. However, such publications typically discussed categorisation approaches and their implications from the perspective of data and computer-sciences-enabled approaches that would have entailed the use of methods and approaches not compatible with the human-based analysis

to be undertaken under this study – indeed, studies have pointed to the limitations of computer-sciences-enabled approaches and the benefit of human-based categorisation.<sup>397</sup>

**Table 7.5 Image categories for human-based sample analysis of the Archive’s image cluster**

| Image categories                 | 1st Level Sub-categories                   | 2nd Level Sub-categories                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Weapons</b>                   | Explosions                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Standalone weapons photo                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)</li> <li>• Technicals<sup>398</sup> and armoured vehicles</li> <li>• Drones</li> <li>• Helicopters and/or other flying platforms</li> <li>• Armoured and non-armoured naval platforms</li> <li>• Ammunitions</li> <li>• Antique/ceremonial weapons (e.g. sabres; swords; etc.)</li> </ul> |
| <b>People and living beings</b>  | Armed people fighting                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Armed people posing                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Large groups/crowd shots                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Demonstrations                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Headshots                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Small meetings/gatherings                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Photos of children                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Dead people                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Pornography                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Other (e.g. animals)                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Places and infrastructure</b> | Infrastructure/inhabited locations/ venues |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Natural landscapes/places                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Religious imagery</b>         | Buildings                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                  | Religious paraphernalia                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

<sup>397</sup> See for example Shatford (1986); Chung and Yoon (2009); Jørgensen (1996); Ornager & Lund (2018).

<sup>398</sup> A type of non-combat vehicle modified to enable military capabilities.

| Image categories      | 1st Level Sub-categories                                                | 2nd Level Sub-categories                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                       | Religious propaganda (e.g. graffiti/artistic writing on walls; posters) |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Written text</b>   | Handwritten                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Printed                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious texts</li> <li>• Al Qa'ida/Jihadist group communiques/propaganda</li> <li>• Other (newspapers, books, posters, cartoons, etc.)</li> </ul> |
| <b>Maps and flags</b> | Recent and current maps (i.e. after 1948)                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building/unit-level maps/plans</li> <li>• Country-level maps</li> <li>• Region-level maps</li> <li>• City-level maps</li> </ul>                     |
|                       | Historical maps (i.e. before 1948)                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Flags                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Country flags/coat of armour</li> <li>• Regional flags/coat of armour</li> <li>• City flags/coat of armour</li> </ul>                               |
|                       | Other flags                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Other</b>          | Buttons                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Emoticons/emoji                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Unreadable files                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Computer icons                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Website banners                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Any other web cache content                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Toys, games or figurines                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Unable to decipher                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                       | Miscellaneous                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vegetation</li> <li>• Art or artefacts</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>                                                                                  |

Following finalisation of the categories to be employed, the study team reviewed each of the images included

in the sample, assigning to each image all of the relevant categories applicable to it and building a repository of images organised according to them. Images whose content was applicable or relevant to multiple categories were categorised to all of these. Following completion of the first categorisation, the study team conducted a category-by-category and sub-category by sub-category analysis, with a view to identifying to what extent the sample generated might offer insights into any of the key themes and topics of the project (i.e. Al Qa'ida as an organisation, its ideology and strategy, and relation to the broader phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism). The results of this analysis are discussed in Sections 7.2 and 7.3 below.

#### 7.1.4. Limitations

Certain limitations, caveats and assumptions that underpin the image-cluster analysis methodology – and the results of the work discussed in this chapter – should be noted.

**Sample-based approach.** The image analysis work conducted under Phase II of the project focused on a sample covering approximately 2 per cent of the image cluster of the Archive. As such, the analysis and assessment of the image cluster stemming from this study are inherently limited to only a small subset of the available content. While the sampling approach selected by the study team was adopted on the assumption that it could facilitate access to some of the most significant image files included in the Archive, the sample might not be fully representative of the entire spectrum of content available in the image cluster. As such, it is possible that relevant typologies of image content might not have been included in the sample considered, and might therefore not have surfaced in the analysis discussed below. Nonetheless, the analysis presented offers relevant insights that might be helpful in providing guidance to other researchers engaging with the Archive to prioritise their efforts and work.

**Categorisation approach.** The sampling categories drawn up and employed by the study team were designed to ensure that the overall framework could be manageable in the context of a human-based analysis. Should a computer-enabled analysis take place, it might be possible to consider broadening further the palette of categories considered to provide a more granular assessment of the typologies of content available.

## 7.2. Image sample analysis

This section discusses the overall results emerging from the human-based categorisation work conducted on the image sample, before focusing on the content and insights emerging from each of the categories populated. Table 7.6 provides an overview of the overall results of the image categorisation work conducted, presenting the distribution of images included in each of the highest level categories used in the analysis approach (see Table 7.5). Table 7.7 provides a more granular overview of the distribution of images included in the sub-categories generated within each of the main analysis categories.

As evidenced by Table 7.6, the majority of images reviewed in the sample pertains to the *Other* and to the *People and living beings* categories. Within the *Other* category, the majority of images included appeared to portray either *pictures of art and artefacts*, or images from websites or web cache. Within the *People and living beings* category, most pictures appear to portray *children* along with *headshots* of various individuals. Finally, the categories with the least images included those pertaining to *Religious imagery* and to *Maps and flags*.

Finally, as discussed in Section 7.1 above, during the analysis images reviewed were included in as many categories as relevant based on their content. Table 7.8 provides an overview of the number of images from the sample that were classified according to two or more categories. As evidenced by Table 7.8, the majority of images reviewed were included in at least two sub-categories, whereas a small minority of images were duplicated across three or more sub-categories.

**Table 7.6 Distribution of images per overarching category**

| Overarching image category | Total number of images |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Weapons                    | 112                    |
| People and living beings   | 476                    |
| Places and infrastructure  | 142                    |
| Religious imagery          | 39                     |
| Written text               | 220                    |
| Maps and flags             | 38                     |
| Other                      | 693                    |
| <b>Total</b>               | <b>1720</b>            |

**Table 7.7 Allocation of images per sub-category**

| Image categories | 1st Level Sub-categories | 2nd Level Sub-categories                                 | Number of images per category |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Weapons</b>   | Explosions               |                                                          | 7                             |
|                  | Standalone weapons photo | • Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)                    | 53                            |
|                  |                          | • Technicals and armoured vehicles                       | 17                            |
|                  |                          | • Drones                                                 | 0                             |
|                  |                          | • Helicopters and/or other flying platforms              | 4                             |
|                  |                          | • Armoured and non-armoured naval platforms              | 1                             |
|                  |                          | • Ammunitions                                            | 3                             |
|                  |                          | • Antique/ceremonial weapons (e.g. sabres; swords; etc.) | 27                            |

| Image categories          | 1st Level Sub-categories                                                | 2nd Level Sub-categories                             | Number of images per category |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| People and living beings  | Armed people fighting                                                   |                                                      | 12                            |
|                           | Armed people posing                                                     |                                                      | 35                            |
|                           | Large groups/crowd shots                                                |                                                      | 33                            |
|                           | Demonstrations                                                          |                                                      | 15                            |
|                           | Headshots                                                               |                                                      | 101                           |
|                           | Small meetings/gatherings                                               |                                                      | 72                            |
|                           | Photos of children                                                      |                                                      | 125                           |
|                           | Dead people                                                             |                                                      | 19                            |
|                           | Pornography                                                             |                                                      | 0                             |
|                           | Other (e.g. animals)                                                    |                                                      | 64                            |
| Places and infrastructure | Infrastructure/inhabited locations/venues                               |                                                      | 77                            |
|                           | Natural landscapes/places                                               |                                                      | 65                            |
| Religious imagery         | Buildings                                                               |                                                      | 24                            |
|                           | Religious paraphernalia                                                 |                                                      | 11                            |
|                           | Religious propaganda (e.g. graffiti/artistic writing on walls; posters) |                                                      | 4                             |
| Written text              | Handwritten                                                             |                                                      | 112                           |
|                           | Printed                                                                 | • Religious texts                                    | 5                             |
|                           |                                                                         | • Al Qa'ida/Jihadist group communiques/propaganda    | 10                            |
|                           |                                                                         | • Other (newspapers, books, posters, cartoons, etc.) | 93                            |
| Maps and flags            | Current maps (i.e. after 1948)                                          | • Building/unit-level maps/plans                     | 0                             |
|                           |                                                                         | • Country-level maps                                 | 3                             |
|                           |                                                                         | • Region-level maps                                  | 4                             |
|                           |                                                                         | • City-level maps                                    | 0                             |
|                           | Historical maps (i.e. before 1948)                                      |                                                      | 7                             |

| Image categories | 1st Level Sub-categories    | 2nd Level Sub-categories        | Number of images per category |
|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
|                  | Flags                       | • Country flags/coat of arms    | 17                            |
|                  |                             | • Regional flags/coat of armour | 0                             |
|                  |                             | • City flags/coat of armour     | 0                             |
|                  | Other flags                 |                                 | 7                             |
| Other            | Buttons                     |                                 | 53                            |
|                  | Emoticons/emoji             |                                 | 6                             |
|                  | Unreadable files            |                                 | 6                             |
|                  | Computer icons              |                                 | 36                            |
|                  | Websites banners            |                                 | 103                           |
|                  | Any other web cache content |                                 | 112                           |
|                  | Toys, games, or figurines   |                                 | 28                            |
|                  | Unable to decipher          |                                 | 65                            |
|                  | Miscellaneous               | • Vegetation                    | 56                            |
|                  |                             | • Art or artefacts              | 174                           |
|                  |                             | • Other                         | 57                            |

Table 7.8 Image duplication mapping

| Number of categories involved in duplication | Number of images |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------|
| 2                                            | 130              |
| 3                                            | 25               |
| 4                                            | 1                |
| 5                                            | 1                |

The following sub-sections provide a qualitative assessment and descriptive overview of the images that were considered for analysis from the sample image cluster by each of the categories.



## 7.2.1. Weapons

### Explosions

Only seven images included in the sample feature an explosion. Five of these images portray explosions from a distance, while two images display explosions from up-close – one of these shows an exploding truck. It was not possible to discern any further insight or information from these pictures.

### Standalone weapons photos

#### *SALW*

The majority of images in the *Standalone weapons photo* fall in the sub-category of *SALW*. Several of these images (22) appear to be stock images of rifles. Other pictures in this sub-category display a range of individuals holding SALW. Most of the individuals portrayed appear to be posing with their weapons, suggesting photos could have been taken as a memory or be used for propaganda. For example, one of the images portrays rows of individuals holding portable rocket launchers, and what appears to be the flag of an extremist group is held by one of the militants in the photo.

Only a few images in the sample display weapons in use. In one such image, a man holds a gun and appears to be preparing to shoot a line of kneeling individuals. Most of the individuals shown in photos with SALW appear to be jihadists or militants from non-state armed groups. In one photo, individuals belonging to regular armed forces are displayed in a stairwell.

#### *Technicals and armoured vehicles*

Most of the 17 images in this sub-category display vehicles in motion. Only one of the images portrays Western soldiers; the remaining ones portray either vehicles by themselves or carrying children or unidentified individuals. One image appears to originate from a propaganda piece of the then-Islamic State in Iraq,<sup>399</sup> showing two columns of US Forces vehicles carrying soldiers in the first and coffins wrapped in the US flag in the second. The caption of the image suggests that this is what occurred to invading forces when entering and when leaving the territory of the Islamic State in Iraq. One of the images displays a tank carrying photos honouring Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Afghan politician and military commander killed by Al Qa'ida in 2001. Another image displays a set of parked technicals that appear to belong to individuals affiliated with the Al Shabaab group.<sup>400</sup>

#### *Helicopters and other flying platforms*

Only four images appear in the category, and only one portrays a helicopter in flight. One of the images included in this sub-category is named 'Russian boneyard' and displays a plain with a number of abandoned aircrafts, helicopters and vehicles in what appears to be an Afghan and/or Central Asian landscape.

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<sup>399</sup> Known until 2006 as Al Qa'ida in Iraq, the organisation's name then changed to Islamic State in Iraq, which is how it will be referenced in this report. Later, its name changed to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and later to 'Islamic State'.

<sup>400</sup> Terrorist organisation in East Africa, principally Somalia, that has pledged allegiance to Al Qa'ida.

*Armoured and non-armoured naval platforms*

Only one image is included in this category. It displays a ship at sea. It is of poor quality and no symbols or flags can be identified.

*Ammunition*

Only three images appear in this category. Two of the images appear to originate from the same scene. They portray militants of a non-state armed group, possibly Al Shabaab in Somalia – based on the garment and appearances of the fighters. The individuals appear to be displaying a set of ammunition as well as a corpse to a group of journalists and/or individuals with cameras and recording devices. The images do not appear to document the shooting of a propaganda piece, but rather to record the undertaking of a media engagement activity of some sort. The third image included in the category is of poor quality and does not possess any clearly identifiable content.

*Antique or ceremonial weapons*

Almost a quarter of the images included in the standalone weapons category fall into this sub-category, and display antique weapons. Most photos appear to have been taken at a single museum or exhibition. The weapons displayed appear to have been manufactured in a Middle Eastern style and include a wide array of scimitars. Further, several of the swords have Arabic calligraphy engraved on them.

## 7.2.2. People and living beings

*Armed people fighting*

Several of the images included in this sub-category also appear in the *SALW* sub-category and discussed in Section 3.2.1 above. In addition, some of the photos display individuals with artillery weapons and main battle tanks. The only individuals in military uniform appear to be wearing Western military gear.

*Armed people posing*

Several of the images included in this sub-category also appear in the *SALW* sub-category discussed in Section 3.2.1 above. Several of the images appear to display individuals associated with non-state armed groups in Afghanistan; however, the quality of the pictures is too low to distinguish specific affiliation across all images. Certain images portray members of what appears to be Al Shabaab.

*Large groups or crowd shots*

A variety of different crowd shots are present in this category. Several images appear to document a march – possibly held in the United Kingdom, based on surrounding buildings – where demonstrators held signs in English with messages against Israel (labelled as ‘the Zionist state’) and expressing solidarity with Palestine in general and Gaza in particular. Other images display what appear as unidentified crowds from Arab, African and Central Asian cities and regions. One image displays a group of children and teenagers around what appears to be a burnt car. Another image displays what appears to be a small riot or fight in an Arab country. Only a minority of the pictures display groups of women. One photo appears to display individuals taking part in the so-called ‘stoning of the Devil’, a ritual performed as part of the annual Islamic Hajj pilgrimage.

## Demonstrations

Almost all of the pictures included in this sub-category correspond to those also included in the previous sub-category *Large groups or crowd shots*. No significant additional pictures were identified in this category.

## Single person and headshots

The images in this sub-category are very varied. Some of the images include children and individuals possibly living in the Abbottabad compound. Other images in this category include photos of politicians and public figures taken from the media and news articles. A small minority of the pictures show militants or people in combat gear. These pictures also appear to originate from media and news articles. Some of the images appear to be taken of the same person repeatedly. However, these tend to be images of children and other individuals possibly living in the Abbottabad compound or in a similar undisclosed and non-identifiable location. Other repeated pictures of a single individual include Yasser Arafat.

## Small meetings and gatherings

As with the previous sub-category, the images in this sub-category are very varied in content. Several of the images showcase people in military uniforms and militants from non-state armed groups. Other images display civilians from what appear to be Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries in their daily lives. The sample includes also a black and white photo appearing to portray part of the so-called Nakba (i.e. the expulsion of large numbers of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948). Most of the images are of men, but several display women as well. Several of the images showcase people in military uniform – one image has the Ansar al Sunnah<sup>401</sup> logo embedded on it. Most appear to be of army personnel, but several showcase militants. However, the quality of the pictures is too low to distinguish specific affiliation across all images, with most of the images appearing to originate from websites, news articles and the media.

## Photos of children

The majority of photos included in this category are of higher resolution, suggesting that they might have been taken using devices in the compound. This hypothesis is further reinforced by the frequency at which a number of children included in these photos appear on multiple instances. Other pictures display children but appear to be originating from internet websites, news articles and the media more broadly.

## Dead people

Approximately 20 pictures were included in this category. A number of photos appear to originate from Al Shabaab propaganda and display dead soldiers who likely belonged to forces of the African Union Mission to Somalia. One of the photos included in the category displays a decapitated head, although the caption on the picture states that this comes from Mexico and that the victim had been beheaded by a drunken colleague during an argument.

## Pornography

No photos falling into this sub-category were identified.

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<sup>401</sup> Iraqi Sunni insurgent group.

## Other

Images included in this sub-category display an array of domestic and farm animals. Most pictures are of higher quality and resolution and display the same animals and scenery on multiple instances, suggesting these might be photos that had been taken from within the compound by some of its inhabitants.

### 7.2.3. Places and infrastructure

#### Infrastructure or inhabited locations or venues

A number of images included in this sub-category display a recurring number of closed or confined spaces. Most of these pictures are of higher quality and resolution, suggesting these might be photos that had been taken from within the compound by some of its inhabitants.

One of the image titles identifies one of the images to be displaying the Hagia Sofia, in Turkey, which appears several times in images of this sub-category. Other photos display buildings from unidentifiable locations and are of lower quality. These pictures appear to be largely originating from internet websites and news articles.

#### Natural landscapes or places

Images in this category contain a mix of images taken with a personal camera or scanned from film originals, and display landscape from Afghanistan or other unidentified Central Asian countries. Other images included in this sub-category are of higher quality and resolution, suggesting they might be photos that had been taken from within the compound by some of its inhabitants. The category also includes a number of stock photos and stock images.

### 7.2.4. Religious imagery

#### Buildings

The images in this sub-category portray mainly mosques, both from the outside and from within. A number of photos also display churches although it is not possible to identify their location or to which denomination they belong. A wide array of photos appear to originate from public websites and stock repositories.

#### Religious paraphernalia

Images included in this sub-category display religious banners as well as examples of religious speeches and texts re-created as a digital image. All images appear to originate from public websites.

#### Religious propaganda

Images included in this sub-category display religious banners, as well as examples of religious speeches and texts recreated as a digital image. All images appear to originate from public websites.

## 7.2.5. Written text

### Handwritten

The majority of images included in this sub-category display Arabic calligraphy on various objects, including copies of the Qur'an. However, there are also images in this cluster that appear to show scanned versions of handwritten documents and letters. Given their potential relevance for generating insights on Al Qa'ida through further research, the study team undertook a closer assessment of these documents. In this context, it was noted that the sampling approach had led to the inclusion of individual pages of the documents, but rarely of documents in their entirety. The study team opted therefore to investigate the Archive with a view to reconstructing documents in their entirety and with a view to assessing their content. An analysis and overview of the documents identified is included below:

- One of the handwritten documents discusses Surah al-Anfal, which is the eighth chapter of the Qur'an. This document is divided into two parts. The first part is a discussion on manners, and specifically the etiquette of listening and how to listen, such as to the Imam when he is giving a speech, and abstaining from talking excessively. The second part of the letter pertains to a lesson on Surah al-Anfal, exploring the concepts that occur in this chapter, which include obedience to God and his messenger, avoiding sins, reliance on God, establishing the prayer, and giving the alms. This second part mentions the Battle of Badr (a major military victory in the early days of Islam), and qualities that believers should demonstrate, that fear in the hearts of enemies is the greatest weapon against the enemy, the importance of Jihad against the disbelievers, the virtue of bravery, and the righteous justification of repelling the evil of the disbelievers and obtaining their rights.

Some of the material within this letter is difficult to decipher. This results in difficulty in offering a comprehensive analysis and conclusion regarding the orthodoxy of the dogma and religious viewpoints presented. However, extremist and jihadist groups often draw on elements within this Surah (and from the following one, Surah At-Tawba – 'The repentance') for their ideological justifications. The author of this document highlights the Battle of Badr, the first battle in the history of Islam, which was an emphatic victory for the Muslims despite their limited resources in comparison to the opposing, non-Muslim side. In the context of this battle, non-Muslims represented the aggressors and many of the Muslim combatants were reportedly wavering and reluctant to engage in battle. These motifs correspond to narratives that Al Qa'ida sought to portray and echo in its propaganda focusing on contemporary societies and events.

- Another written text appears to be a poem about jihad. However, the contents are difficult to decipher due to the handwriting style, and it was not possible to analyse this text in further depth.
- Another document appears to discuss religious topics, such as the benefits of physical exercise and walking to mosques, and mentions jihad and martyrdom. Specifically, the document mentions the virtues of martyrdom and links jihad to seeking knowledge and to the lofty status of the one who seeks knowledge. It is worth noting that one of the pages of this document appears to be missing from the Archive and it was not possible to identify among available files.

- A document appears to present a poem that mentions the name of various children of Osama Bin Laden (Maryam and Summaya) and also refers to 'grandchildren', 'crusaders' and 'jihad'. However, it was not possible to further investigate this document due to limits in the legibility of the calligraphy.
- One written document discusses a hadith and appears to be a standard account of a prophetic saying.
- A document included in the Archive is addressed to 'my sister', Umm Khalid, who might be one of the compound inhabitants. The author writes that they have received a letter from their sister, for which they are thankful. Their sister prays to see the recipient soon and for an Islamic state to be established soon, where they can join one another. The author has just married someone, despite people's opposition to her husband's skin colour. The author says she is praying for martyrdom whilst in the land of hijra and jihad. The letter also mentions Maryam and Summaya (Bin Laden's daughters), and sends greeting to 'Fatoomah and Ayoosha' – this could be an affectionate way of referring to young children bearing the names Fatima and Aisha.
- A document included in the sample appears to be a letter that has several addressees. It appears to be from Abu Abdullah al-Halabi, a son-in-law of Osama Bin Laden who died in a drone strike in Pakistan in 2010. The first addressees are 'my children', specifically Abdullah, Aisha, Usama and Siham. The letter expresses pleasure at hearing their voices, and expresses a desire to have a longer recording with a slower recital of the Qur'an. The second addressee is their 'brother Khalid', whom the writer thanks for sending voice messages of his children. The writer also thanks Khalid and 'my aunty' and 'their mother Maryam' for what they have done for his children. The writer conveys the news of the martyrdom of a brother that he 'trusted and organised with.' The third addressee is Umm Khalid, whom the writer says he hopes is not upset with him, as he has not received a letter from her for some time. He states that he longs for a reunion with his family, and that 'his aunty' sent a flash/memory drive with a complete curriculum up to secondary school. The writer says that he prays to be reunited with his family and for Khalid to find a righteous wife. The final addressee is his father. This part provides some sort of situational update on the 'enemies of religion and the apostates in the area of Masud.' The author mentions the existence of spy planes – likely to be drones – in the area, and making a prayer for the mujahideen. The letter then concludes with an overview on money available in a bank account.
- Another document included in the Archive contains derogatory content towards Jewish people stating that 'God has allowed the martyrs of Palestine to prevail over their enemy – the descendants of the pigs and monkeys', and mentioned that 'a heroic martyr has caused the death of a hundred Zionists', making the threat that this is only the first of many attacks. The letter is dated February/March 2010.
- Some of the handwritten documents included in the sample do not have any content that relates to Al Qaeda. For example, one of these documents focuses on the month of Ramadan. The author mentions some of the virtues and specialities of the month. There is nothing of note in this letter, aside from praise about the practice of Ramadan. Another such letter discusses how to wake up for the night prayer, Qiyam al-Layl, which is an additional prayer performed between the last obligatory prayer (Isha) of one day and early dawn of the next day. It is considered as an important duty for the most righteous and religious Muslims. This letter includes quotes giving advice from early Muslims on righteous behaviour. Another text discusses the impact of the recital/sound of the Qur'an, and how some early Arabs, prior

to becoming Muslims and despite being opponents of the religion, would enjoy listening to the Qur'an, and how the ears can help in attaining paradise rather than work against the individual.

## Printed

### *Religious texts*

The images in this sub-category vary greatly in terms of their content. Two of the images appear to be from a Shia religious book, possibly contemporary. Two other images appear to be religious posters: one is a hadith, which advises a recommended supplication for forgiveness, and the second is a Qur'anic verse that is often used by jihadists to justify their enmity towards non-Muslims. The last image appears to be the Bismallah, the opening phrase of the Qur'an, and is written in calligraphic writing.

### *Al Qa'ida or Jihadist group communiques or propaganda*

The images in this sub-category vary in content. A number of the images are posters and banners from jihadist organisations or parts of such organisations, such as al-Sahab, Ansar al-Sunnah and the Global Islamic Media Front. The content of these posters and banners varies, however they mainly appear to be targeting possible recruits. Two images, for example, focus on the importance of the willingness to sacrifice oneself to the benefit of a holy cause, including through death. Another image shows Sulaiman bin Nasir al-Alwan, a religious scholar influential in jihadist circles. Another image displays a written statement that calls for Islamic unity; the document appears to be a draft as it carries handwritten corrections in red and black ink.

### *Other*

The images in this sub-category include scans of children's books, and pictures of signs that are likely to be museum captions for the ceremonial weapons included in other photos in the Archive. An image presents the scan of an English-language book discussing the Bin Laden family business and the structure of its management at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Other images appear to be from internet website banners.

## 7.2.6. Maps and flags

### Current maps

#### *Building or unit-level maps or plans*

No photos falling into this sub-category were identified.

#### *Country-level maps*

Only a handful of images are included in this sub-category. The images show a map of Afghanistan, a map of Pakistan and a partial map of Afghanistan with Kandahar highlighted. All maps appear to originate from news articles and online media websites.

#### *Region-level maps*

Only a handful of images are included in this sub-category. The images in the sample show maps of Central Asia and a map of West Africa. All maps appear to originate from news articles and online media websites.

### *City maps*

No photos falling into this sub-category were identified.

### Historical maps

Only a handful of images are included in this sub-category. The images mainly portray Muslim- and Christian-controlled territories in Europe and the Middle East in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. All maps appear to originate from online websites or geography and history books.

### Flags

#### *Country flags or coats of arms*

The majority of images included in this sub-category comprise the same images discussed in Section 3.2.2 that portray individuals at a demonstration waving the Palestinian flag. Other photos include icons representing individual flags, or photos of official events from news articles where flags were employed in the background of public speeches and meetings.

#### *Other flags*

Only a handful of images are included in this sub-category. One image shows the symbol of Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Other flags pictured in this category include previously discussed photos, where the logo or flag of what appears to be the Al Shabaab group are displayed.

## 7.2.7. Other

### Buttons

Images included in this category include images of buttons from a large variety of websites. In particular, buttons to switch between different languages are present (e.g. Arabic, English, Chinese, German, and Korean).

### Emoticons and emojis

Images included in this category include a wide array of emoticons and symbols used on websites.

### Unreadable files

Six of the images sampled were unreadable and could not be opened.

### Computer icons

Images included in this category include a wide array of icons used on computers and other IT devices.

### Website banners

Images included in this category include banners and logos in different languages. Some of the logos and banners encountered include: the Firefox logo, banners of games websites, a banner for the 'Islam Japan' website, the New York Times, the Jamestown Foundation, The MidEast News Source, CNN, worldthreats.com, a banner advertising avatars to disguise oneself on Skype, The Irish Times, BBC, and Foreign Affairs.



### Other web cache content

Images included in this category include a variety of cache content downloaded from webpages visited from devices retrieved from the compound.

### Toys, games, or figurines

The images included in this category includes figurines portraying military figures, however most of the games appear to be images of online games.

### Unable to decipher

The images included in this category are either blurry, or of such low resolution that it was not possible to ascertain their content.

### Miscellaneous

#### *Vegetation*

Images included in this category display a garden, fruit and flowers. Since images are on average of higher quality and resolution and appear to originate from the same area they might have been taken by or destined to the inhabitants of the compound. Other images included in this category are stock photos of vegetation or flowers.

#### *Art or artefacts*

Images included in this category include for the most part photos that appear to have been taken at museums or exhibitions and that display ancient swords, helmets, coats of armour and pottery.

#### *Other*

Images included in this category portray a vast array of things, including a thermometer, books, screensavers, drawings and paintings, money and cars.

## 7.3. Summary and conclusions

Overall, the images sampled provide limited scope for analysis and limited analytical value with regards to the study aim. The division of images by file size and file type does not necessarily provide further insight in the quality of the images sampled. While the study team's hypothesis was that DSC, IMG and CIMG images might provide more salient insights due to originating from digital cameras or by devices equipped with one, the results were mixed.

The DSC images reviewed cover a wide range of categories. A portion of the images reviewed show images of animals – such as cats – some of which might have lived in the Abbottabad compound or in a similar non-identifiable location as they are taken in what appears to be a home or garden. Other images portray people, including both children and pictures of people in groups of various sizes. Some of the images appear to have been taken in locations other than the Abbottabad compound, although there are a number of photos of younger children, suggesting the setting might be the Abbottabad compound or a similar non-identified location.

Smaller proportions of DSC images feature written text, including both handwritten and ‘other’ text (e.g. newspapers, posters, etc.). For the most part, these include photos of the Qur’an and signs from museums or exhibitions. Other images include natural landscapes or infrastructure (81 images) – including religious buildings, such as mosques – vegetation (48 images) and weapons (40 images). Most of these images feature SALW – and pictures of antique or ceremonial weapons, taken at what appears to be a museum or exhibition.

The IMG images (225 images in total) also covers a wide range of categories. This includes a number of images showing written text, including also the handwritten letters that have been analysed in further depth by the study team. Some of the other images show images of people, either in groups or posing with weapons, containing a mixture of high-quality images, and images from websites or banners; other images display infrastructure or landscapes and a small number of religious buildings. A number of the IMG images include files falling under the ‘other’ category, including website banners, buttons and other web cache content. A small proportion of the images (17 images) pertain to weapons – the majority of these images display either antique or ceremonial weapons.

CIMG images (62 in total) primarily comprise of people, such as photos of children or headshots. The pictures of children appear to be family pictures, as several of the children are featured in multiple pictures. Other pictures, such as the headshots, feature children or other adults, possibly taken within the Abbottabad compound or a similar non-identified location.

To conclude, the one category of the sample of Archive images that could yield further insight for exploration would be the handwritten notes (IMG file type) that were scanned or photographed. As evidenced in the current sample, these handwritten texts and letters could provide insights with regard to links between inhabitants of the compound and the outside world.



## 8. Audio analysis

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This chapter provides an overview of the approach taken to analyse the audio cluster of the Archive. It opens with a detailed overview of the methodology employed (Section 8.1), before discussing emerging findings and results from the human-based analysis of transcripts (Section 8.2), and then summarising conclusions drawn from the study team and informing the responses to Phase II research questions (Section 8.3).

### 8.1. Audio analysis approach and limitations

#### 8.1.1. The Archive's audio cluster

The audio cluster of the Archive comprises approximately 11,000 files. Based on their duration length as visible through file explorer software, audio files included in the Archive can be clustered as illustrated in Table 8.1.

**Table 8.1 Archive audio files distribution by length bands**

| Length                                                     | Number of files |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 0 to 3 minutes (0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0")                      | 2,142 files     |
| 3 to 10 minutes (0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0")                    | 1,319 files     |
| 10 to 30 minutes (0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0")                  | 732 files       |
| 30 minutes to 1 hour (0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0")               | 607 files       |
| 1 to 3 hours (1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0")                        | 444 files       |
| Unknown duration (not visible from file explorer software) | 6,682 files     |

#### 8.1.2. Sampling approach

To characterise the audio cluster and investigate its potential to yield relevant insights on Al Qa'ida through further research, the study team conducted both a human- and a machine-based analysis of transcripts of a stratified random sample of the audio files included in the Archive.

In particular, the study team generated a sample comprising 15 hours of audio materials to be transcribed and to later be analysed, both qualitatively by study team members and through the machine-enabled corpus linguistic analytics discussed in Chapter 10 of this document. The study team adopted a stratified sampling approach using the audio bands presented in Table 8.1 as the strata around which to build the audio sample

for analysis. Table 8.2 provides an overview of the parameters employed to generate the sample for audio analysis activities.

**Table 8.2 Audio cluster sample composition**

| Duration band          | Hours to be transcribed |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0"   | ~1h                     |
| 0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0"  | ~1h                     |
| 0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0" | ~2h                     |
| 0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0"  | ~3h                     |
| 1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0"   | ~5h                     |
| No visible duration    | ~3h                     |

Within each of the sample stratum, the study team identified the required number of files for inclusion in a random manner. However, based on insights generated during Phase I of the project, the study team – in coordination with WODC and the project SAC – agreed to adopt a set of exclusion criteria designed to avoid the inclusion of unequivocally non-relevant files in the transcription and analysis work. Table 8.3 provides an overview of the exclusion criteria applied to audio files.

**Table 8.3 Audio sample exclusion criteria**

| Exclusion criteria                                                                                                                                           | Rationale                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anything recorded from a public broadcaster regardless of whether it relates to Al Qa'ida/Jihadi terrorism (e.g. news segments, cartoons, hobby videos etc.) | Any material from a public broadcaster (e.g. satellite TV channels) would not provide new knowledge on Al Qa'ida as an organisation, its ideology, and strategy as compared to the research conducted under Phase I of the study. Moreover, it is worth noting that some of this material might not be pertinent to the aims or subject matter of the study (e.g. cartoons; hobby videos). |
| Anything that does not contain spoken word (e.g. music files)                                                                                                | It would not be possible to transcribe files with no words. Transcription of music lyrics would also not generate relevant insights, unless these were Islamic anasheed (songs chanted a cappella), which have been used in the past for propaganda purposes by Jihadist groups.                                                                                                           |
| Movies                                                                                                                                                       | Movies are not pertinent to the aims of the study (i.e. furthering our understanding of Al Qa'ida's ideology, strategy and organisation). Videos/audios might indicate personal preferences of people living in the compound.                                                                                                                                                              |
| Language other than Arabic                                                                                                                                   | It is assumed that the working language of the Al Qa'ida leadership was Arabic, and as such these documents would present the most useful and pertinent information in relation to the study aims.                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Corrupt/unplayable file                                                                                                                                      | It would not be possible to open the file for analysis.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

To keep a record of files excluded from the sample for analysis, the study team established a log to record information on randomly selected audio files that did not meet selection criteria. Table 8.4 provides an overview of the template employed to record information on files excluded from the sample.

**Table 8.4 Template for recording audio files excluded from the study analysis sample**

| File name                                                                                      | File ID                   | File type                   | Duration |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Include name of file in its entirety                                                           | Include alphanumeric hash | Include file extension/type | hh:mm:ss |
| Rationale for exclusion                                                                        |                           |                             |          |
| High-level statement clarifying rationale for exclusion from files to be transcribed/analysed. |                           |                             |          |

Within the audio cluster strata identified, the study team randomly selected, assessed and included or excluded files in the sample for further analysis until the required sample had been assembled. Table 8.5 below provides an overview of the number of files included in each sample stratum to achieve the required length to transcribe, as well as an indication of the total number of files assessed in the sampling process, including those that were excluded on the basis of exclusion criteria.

**Table 8.5 Overview of audio sample file number composition and of random files assessed to identify relevant materials**

| Duration band          | Number of audio files selected per duration band | Total number of audio files sampled (including excluded files) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0"   | 35                                               | 131                                                            |
| 0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0"  | 14                                               | 24                                                             |
| 0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0" | 5                                                | 8                                                              |
| 0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0"  | 5                                                | 7                                                              |
| 1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0"   | 3                                                | 5                                                              |
| No known duration      | 2                                                | 2                                                              |

### 8.1.3. Analytical approach

Once the audio sample for analysis had been assembled, files included in the sample were transferred to an agreed external service provider for transcribing. Transcripts were then subject to a qualitative, human-based analysis, but also included in broader corpus linguistic text analysis work. The following pages provide an overview of the approach and results of the human-based analysis work conducted. For further information on the corpus linguistics analysis conducted please refer to Chapter 6 of this document.

To conduct a qualitative assessment of the audio sample, the study team reviewed all of the transcripts with a view to identifying any potentially novel or relevant content that might help generate insights into Al Qa'ida, its ideology, organisation, strategy and broader relation to the phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism.

For each transcript, the study team recorded a brief review and analysis employing the template presented in Table 8.6 below.

**Table 8.6 Audio sample qualitative review template**

| Audio file name                                                                 | File type                                     | Duration |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------|
| Insert complete original audio file name here                                   | .mp3/.wav/etc.                                | 00:00:00 |
| Overview of content                                                             |                                               |          |
| This section will include a brief summary of what content the audio files cover |                                               |          |
| Does the audio contains data relevant to research on                            |                                               |          |
| Al Qa'ida's ideology                                                            | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |
| Al Qa'ida's organisation                                                        | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |
| Al Qa'ida's strategy                                                            | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |
| Jihadi Terrorism                                                                | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |

#### 8.1.4. Limitations

Certain limitations, caveats and assumptions that underpin the audio cluster analysis methodology and the results of the work discussed in this chapter should be noted.

**Sample-based approach.** In light of resource and time constraints, the audio analysis work conducted under Phase II of the project focused on a sample covering a limited volume of the audio cluster of the Archive. As such, the analysis and assessment of the audio cluster stemming from this study is inherently limited to a small subset of the available content. While the sampling approach selected by the study team was adopted on the assumption that it could facilitate access to some of the most significant audio files included in the Archive, the sample might not be fully representative of the entire spectrum of content available in the audio cluster. As such, it is possible that relevant typologies of audio content might not have been included in the sample considered and might have therefore not surfaced in the analysis discussed below. Nonetheless, the analysis presented offers relevant insights that might be helpful in providing guidance to other researchers engaging with the Archive and help prioritise their efforts and work.

## 8.2. Audio sample analysis

This section discusses the results emerging from the human-based analysis conducted on the audio sample, structured according to the different duration bands employed to assemble the sample.

### 8.2.1. 0 to 3 minutes duration

The audio reviewed in this duration band primarily contain recitations of the Qur'an and of its Surahs, as well as anasheed – a cappella songs focusing primarily on topics related to Islam, and which have been used

by extremist groups for propaganda purposes. In this instance, the anasheed present in this time band of the audio sample include some references to jihad, but anasheed focusing solely on religious concepts with no extremist undertones are also present.

A small subset of audio files included in this band of the sample contain recordings of Osama Bin Laden's speeches. For instance, one of the audio files reviewed contains a speech directed to the French government and discussing French involvement in Afghanistan alongside US forces. A second speech is directed to the US President and focuses on the prisons of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. A third recording discusses developments in Somalia. These recordings appear to have been intended for wider dissemination and are consistent with some of the known speeches by Osama Bin Laden distributed via various media channels over the years.

Other audios appear to capture recordings of public events, such as protesters' chants at demonstrations about Algeria and Tunisia, as well as an interview and discussion between two individuals about the Qur'an. There is also an audio – also likely intended for wider distribution and to be already in the public domain – that makes threats to Christians in the Arab World. However, it is not possible to ascertain who speaks or which group is making these threats based on information included in the audio file alone.

### 8.2.2. 3 to 10 minutes duration

As for the previous time band, the audio files included in the sample under this duration appear to primarily contain recitations of the Qur'an, anasheed and other short religious lectures. While most of the material is of religious but non-extremist nature, several of the audios do have a more radical theme. Some of the anasheed express more extremist messages. For instance, one anasheed calls for Muslims to join jihad, whereas another expresses anti-Jewish sentiments. Furthermore, one of the religious lectures included discusses the application of Shariah while making references to the fact that Muslims should support all forms of jihad, not just efforts occurring in Palestine. None of the audios included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

### 8.2.3. 10 to 30 minutes duration

As for the previous time bands, the audio files included in the sample under this duration appear to contain further recitations of the Qur'an. In addition, one of the audio files presents an interview with a person talking about time spent with Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist who founded the terrorist group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which later grew into the Islamic State in Iraq. However, the account included in the audio files is mainly a biographical one and does not appear to reveal previously unknown information or to be confidential in nature. More broadly, none of the audios included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

### 8.2.4. 30 minutes to 1 hour duration

As for the previous time bands, the audio files included in the sample under this duration contain a majority of files with religious content, including one further recitation from the Qur'an, and sermons and lectures on religious topics. Other audio files discuss how to be a good Muslim and how to have a good Muslim household, putting forward a Salafi perspective. One of the audio files included focuses on the ongoing conflict in Iraq and discusses different insurgent and militant groups in the region, including Ansaar al-



Islam, and Jaysh al-Ansar al Sunnah. None of the audios included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

#### 8.2.5. 1 to 3 hours duration

As for the previous time bands, the audio files included in the sample under this duration contain a majority of files with religious content, including one recitation from the Qur'an, and a lecture and sermon. None of the audios included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

#### 8.2.6. No known duration

Only two audio files were included in this sample stratum due to their duration. As with the previous time bands, audio files included in this stratum cover religious themes and topics, albeit not from an extremist perspective. One of the audio files contains a religious lesson on Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), whereas the second contains a lesson on ahadith (prophetic narrations). Neither of the audios included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

### 8.3. Summary and conclusions

Overall, the qualitative review of audio transcripts generated under the study indicate that the majority of audio files included in the Phase II sample focus on religious topics, although not exclusively or predominantly from an extremist perspective. Recitations of the Qur'an, anasheed, lessons and sermons are particularly prevalent across all sample strata.

More broadly, all of the recordings included in the study sample appear to be public and non-sensitive or private in their content. The audios that focus on issues and topics closely related to the study's subject matter (e.g. the audio providing a biography of the life of Abu Mu'sab Al Zarkawi) provide little to no novel information of interest in addition to what is already known more widely and documented in the study Phase I report. In this regard, it appears that based on the results of this initial sampling analysis there is a limited potential for the audio cluster of the Archive to help generate novel insights and knowledge about Al Qa'ida, its organisation, strategy, ideology and relations to the broader phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism.

## 9. Video analysis

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This chapter provides an overview of the approach taken to analyse the video cluster of the Archive. It opens with a detailed overview of the methodology employed (Section 9.1), before discussing emerging findings and results from the human-based analysis of transcripts (Section 9.2) and from the human-based video analysis conducted (Section 9.3). The chapter concludes by summarising insights generated that will help inform the responses to Phase II research questions (Section 9.4).

### 9.1. Video analysis approach and limitations

#### 9.1.1. The Archive's video cluster

The video cluster of the Archive comprises approximately 10,256 files. Based on their duration length as visible through file explorer software, video files included in the Archive can be clustered as illustrated in Table 9.1.

**Table 9.1 Archive video files distribution by length bands**

| Length                                                     | Number of files |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 0 to 3 minutes (0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0")                      | 2,128 files     |
| 3 to 10 minutes (0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0")                    | 727 files       |
| 10 to 30 minutes (0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0")                  | 578 files       |
| 30 minutes to 1 hour (0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0")               | 368 files       |
| 1 to 3 hours (1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0")                        | 133 files       |
| Unknown duration (not visible from file explorer software) | 6,322 files     |

#### 9.1.2. Sampling approach

To characterise the video cluster and investigate its potential to yield relevant insights on Al Qa'ida through further research, the study team conducted both a human- and a machine-based analysis of transcripts of a stratified random sample of the video files included in the Archive. Furthermore, in the case of the video cluster, the study team also conducted a qualitative review of a stratified random sample of 80 hours of videos from the Archive.

To this end, the study team generated two samples. One sample contained files to be transcribed and to be analysed through a qualitative review of their transcripts and through the corpus linguistic analysis approach discussed in Chapter 10 of this document. Another sample contained files to be reviewed as videos through a human-based qualitative review. In both instances, the sampling approach mirrors the method employed for the audio cluster of the Archive (see Chapter 8).

### Video sample for transcription and qualitative and machine-based analysis

First, the study team generated a sample comprising 15 hours of video materials for transcription and for later analysis, both qualitatively by study team members and through the machine-enabled corpus linguistic analytics discussed in Chapter 10 of this document. The study team adopted a stratified sampling approach using the video bands presented in Table 9.1 as the strata around which to build the audio sample for analysis. Table 9.2 provides an overview of the parameters employed to generate the sample for video transcription and analysis activities.

**Table 9.2 Video cluster sample composition for transcription work**

| Duration band          | Hours to be transcribed |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0"   | ~1h                     |
| 0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0"  | ~1h                     |
| 0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0" | ~2h                     |
| 0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0"  | ~3h                     |
| 1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0"   | ~5h                     |
| No visible duration    | ~3h                     |

Within each of the sample stratum, the study team identified the required number of files for inclusion in a random manner. However, based on insights generated during Phase I of the project, the study team – in coordination with WODC and the project SAC – agreed to adopt a set of exclusion criteria designed to avoid the inclusion of unequivocally non-relevant files in the transcription and analysis work to be performed. Table 9.3 provides an overview of the exclusion criteria applied to video files.

**Table 9.3 Video sample exclusion criteria**

| Exclusion criteria                                                                                                                                           | Rationale                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anything recorded from a public broadcaster regardless of whether it relates to Al Qa'ida/Jihadi terrorism (e.g. news segments, cartoons, hobby videos etc.) | Any material from a public broadcaster (e.g. satellite TV channels) would not provide new knowledge on Al Qa'ida as an organisation, its ideology and strategy as compared to the research conducted under Phase I of the study. Moreover, it is worth noting that some of this material might not be pertinent to the aims or subject matter of the study (e.g. cartoons; hobby videos). |
| Anything that does not contain spoken word (e.g. music files). [Note: only applies to videos for transcription as opposed to videos for human analysis]      | It would not be possible to transcribe files with no words. Transcription of music lyrics would also not generate relevant insights, unless these were Islamic anasheed (songs chanted a cappella), which have been used in the past for propaganda purposes by Jihadist groups.                                                                                                          |
| Movies                                                                                                                                                       | Movies are not pertinent to the aims of the study (i.e. furthering our understanding of Al Qa'ida's ideology, strategy and organisation). These videos/audios might indicate personal preferences of people living in the compound.                                                                                                                                                       |
| Language other than Arabic                                                                                                                                   | It is assumed that the working language of the Al Qa'ida leadership was Arabic, and as such these documents would present the most useful and pertinent information in relation to the study aims.                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Corrupt/unplayable file                                                                                                                                      | It would not be possible to open the file for analysis.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

To keep a record of files excluded from the sample for analysis, the study team established a log to record information on randomly selected video files that did not meet selection criteria. Table 9.4 provides an overview of the template employed to record information on files excluded from the sample.

**Table 9.4 Template for recording video files excluded from the study analysis sample**

| File name                                                                                      | File ID                   | File type                   | Duration |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Include name of file in its entirety                                                           | Include alphanumeric hash | Include file extension/type | hh:mm:ss |
| Rationale for exclusion                                                                        |                           |                             |          |
| High-level statement clarifying rationale for exclusion from files to be transcribed/analysed. |                           |                             |          |

Within the identified video cluster strata, the study team randomly selected, assessed and included or excluded files in the sample for further analysis until the required sample had been assembled. Table 9.5 below provides an overview of the number of files included in each sample stratum to achieve the required length to transcribe, as well as an indication of the total number of files assessed in the sampling process, including those that were excluded on the basis of exclusion criteria.

**Table 9.5 Overview of video sample file number composition and of random files assessed to identify relevant materials**

| Duration band          | Number of video files selected per duration band | Total number of video files sampled (including excluded files) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0"   | 36                                               | 122                                                            |
| 0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0"  | 12                                               | 42                                                             |
| 0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0" | 7                                                | 22                                                             |
| 0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0"  | 4                                                | 5                                                              |
| 1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0"   | 4                                                | 6                                                              |
| No known duration      | 29                                               | 52                                                             |

### Video sample for human-based review

Second, the study team generated a sample comprising 80 hours of video materials for review and analysis through a human-based qualitative analysis. The study team adopted the same stratified sampling approach discussed above for the video sample for transcription. The approach also remained unchanged in terms of the exclusion criteria, exclusion log and overall sampling strata employed. Table 9.6 provides an overview of the parameters employed to generate the sample for video analysis activities.

**Table 9.6 Video cluster sample composition for human review**

| Duration band          | Hours to be transcribed |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0"   | ~1h                     |
| 0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0"  | ~7h                     |
| 0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0" | ~15h                    |
| 0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0"  | ~20h                    |
| 1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0"   | ~34h                    |
| No visible duration    | ~3h                     |

Table 9.7 below provides an overview of the number of files included in each sample stratum to achieve the required length to review, as well as an indication of the total number of files assessed in the sampling process, including those that were excluded on the basis of exclusion criteria.

**Table 9.7 Overview of video sample file number composition and of random files assessed to identify relevant materials**

| Duration band          | Number of video files selected per duration band | Total number of video files sampled (including excluded files) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0h 0' 0" to 0h 3' 0"   | 35                                               | 83                                                             |
| 0h 3' 1" to 0h 10' 0"  | 80                                               | 164                                                            |
| 0h 10' 1" to 0h 30' 0" | 53                                               | 143                                                            |
| 0h 30' 1" to 1h 0' 0"  | 31                                               | 38                                                             |
| 1h 0' 1" to 3h 0' 0"   | 26                                               | 37                                                             |
| No known duration      | 42                                               | 75                                                             |

### 9.1.3. Overview of analytical approach

#### Transcripts analysis

Once the first video sample for analysis had been assembled, files included in the sample were transferred to an agreed external service provider for transcribing. Transcripts were then subject to a qualitative, human-based analysis, but also included in broader corpus linguistic text analysis work. Section 5.2 provides an overview of the approach and results of the human-based analysis work conducted. For further information on the corpus linguistics analysis conducted, please refer to chapter 6 of this document.

To conduct a qualitative assessment of the video sample transcribed, the study team reviewed all of the transcripts with a view to identifying any potentially novel or relevant content that might help generate insights into Al Qa'ida, its ideology, organisation, strategy and broader relation to the phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism.

For each transcript, the study team recorded a brief review and analysis employing the template presented in Table 9.8 below.

**Table 9.8 Video sample transcripts qualitative review template**

| Video file name                                                                       | File type                                     | Duration |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------|
| Insert complete original audio file name here                                         | .wmv/.mp4/etc.                                | 00:00:00 |
| <b>Overview of content</b>                                                            |                                               |          |
| This section will include here a brief summary of what content the audio files cover. |                                               |          |
| <b>Does the audio contains data relevant to research on</b>                           |                                               |          |
| <b>Al Qa'ida's ideology</b>                                                           | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |
| <b>Al Qa'ida's organisation</b>                                                       | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |
| <b>Al Qa'ida's strategy</b>                                                           | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |
| <b>Jihadi Terrorism</b>                                                               | Yes/No (if yes add a brief clarification why) |          |

### Human-based video review

During the human-based analysis of videos, the study team reviewed all of the videos included in the sample with a view to identifying any potentially novel or relevant content that might help generate insights into Al Qa'ida, its ideology, organisation, strategy and broader relation to the phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism. For each video, the study team recorded a brief review and analysis employing the template presented in Table 9.9 below.

Table 9.9 Extraction template for the human-based analysis of the second video sample

| Video name                                          | Video ID                 | File type                           | Duration        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Video name</i>                                   | <i>Video ID</i>          | <i>Please enter video file type</i> | <i>hh:mm:ss</i> |
| Synopsis                                            |                          |                                     |                 |
| <i>Brief overview of the contents of the video</i>  |                          |                                     |                 |
| Visual narrative summary and assessment             |                          |                                     |                 |
| <i>Overview on type of filming/editing etc.</i>     |                          |                                     |                 |
| Does the video contain data relevant to research on |                          |                                     |                 |
| Al Qa'ida's ideology                                | Yes/No                   |                                     |                 |
|                                                     | If yes, please summarise |                                     |                 |
| Al Qa'ida's organisation                            | Yes/No                   |                                     |                 |
|                                                     | If yes, please summarise |                                     |                 |
| Al Qa'ida's strategy                                | Yes/No                   |                                     |                 |
|                                                     | If yes, please summarise |                                     |                 |
| Jihadi Terrorism                                    | Yes/No                   |                                     |                 |
|                                                     | If yes, please summarise |                                     |                 |

#### 9.1.4. Limitations

Certain limitations, caveats and assumptions that underpin the video cluster analysis methodology and the results of the work discussed in this chapter should be noted.

**Sample-based approach.** In light of resource and time constraints, the video analysis work conducted under Phase II of the project focused on samples covering a limited volume of the video cluster of the Archive. As such, the analysis and assessment of the video cluster stemming from this study is inherently limited to a small subset of the available content. While the sampling approach selected by the study team was adopted on the assumption that it could facilitate access to some of the most significant image files included in the Archive, the sample might not be fully representative of the entire spectrum of content available in the video cluster. As such, it is possible that relevant typologies of video content might not have been included in the sample considered, and might have therefore not surfaced in the analysis discussed below. Nonetheless, the analysis presented offers relevant insights that might be helpful in providing guidance for researchers engaging with the Archive to prioritise their efforts and work.

**Content novelty.** When analysing the video samples, the study team sought to assess their novelty (i.e. whether a video was likely to have been circulated more widely, and therefore be known by the wider public and research and intelligence circles), exclusivity (i.e. whether a video was of a public or a private meeting or event), as well as their relevance to the study aims. To assess novelty, the study team assumed that any



video with editing, such as overlaid text, including website addresses, and/or branding (e.g. logos from terrorist groups or of terrorist nature) would be of low novelty, as these elements indicate that a video was likely to have been widely distributed. This assumption does not necessarily entail that these videos were subsequently released publicly and, within this scope of this study, it is not possible to assess whether these videos were indeed shared or consumed more widely.

**Exclusion criteria.** One of the criteria for the exclusion of videos for transcription was to remove any video that did not contain spoken word, as it would not be possible to transcribe non-verbal content. While the human-based video analysis did include videos with no spoken words, the videos sampled for transcription might have included videos of relevance based on their visual content (e.g. images or specific footage) that were excluded due to their lack of verbal content.

## 9.2. Video sample transcripts analysis

This section discusses the results emerging from the human-based analysis conducted on the video sample generated for transcribing, structured according to the different duration bands employed to assemble the sample.

### 9.2.1. 0 to 3 minutes duration

The video files included in the sample under this duration band contain a majority of files showcasing jihadist and terrorist attacks. Most videos have anasheed in the background, whereas others have fighters proclaiming religious slogans or the takbir. One video of a jihadist attack has a Qur'anic recitation playing in the background. The attacks shown in video seem to mainly take place in Iraq and to target American and/or Western forces deployed there.

The sample under this duration band also includes three videos featuring Bin Laden delivering speeches addressed to the American people. The content of these speeches revolves around the economic crisis America was facing after 2008. Other videos in the sample feature content inciting violence or promoting jihad, expressing anti-Shia content or portraying graphic content (e.g. a street execution). It is worth noting that this duration band also features videos that seem to have been recorded in the compound or in a similarly confined space, although they bear no significant relevance to the study's subject matter of focus.

### 9.2.2. 3 to 10 minutes duration

The video files included in the sample under this duration band contain only one video of a terrorist attack. The majority of the videos included under this duration band present instead ideological or religious content, most of which appears to be extremist in nature. Videos included under this duration band feature speeches and sermons from prominent members of Al Qa'ida, such as Saeed al Ghamedy and Ayman Al Zawahiri. In these videos, Al Qa'ida representatives incite jihad and criticise the US and the so-called 'Zionists' and 'Crusaders', also because of their military presence in the holy land (i.e. Saudi Arabia). Another video included in this duration band of the sample features Ansar al Sunna interviewing some of their prisoners. Lastly, non-extremist content included in this duration band sample comprises a video lecture about fatawa (religious opinions) and a children's nasheed. None of the videos included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

### 9.2.3. 10 to 30 minutes duration

As with videos included in the previous duration band, video files included in the sample under this duration band contain only one video of a terrorist attack. Videos included under this duration band feature more heavily propagandised content. For example, one video that appears to have been produced by Ansar al-Sunna showcases interviews with the residents of the Dayala province in Iraq. Residents discuss the aftermath of attacks committed by Americans and ‘apostate’ forces. Propaganda videos included in this duration band touch on issues of jihad and martyrdom, with videos often encouraging the undertaking of suicide attacks to dislodge US forces from the Arabian Peninsula.

One of the videos included in the sample under this duration band features Bin Laden addressing the American people directly, and encouraging them to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, two videos appear to have been released by the Muslim Brotherhood, and one video appears to have been published by an Algerian group criticising then-President Bouteflika and inciting Moroccans to rise against ‘Crusaders’ and Jewish people. None of the videos included in this sample stratum appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources.

### 9.2.4. 30 minutes to 1 hour duration

Sampled files included under this duration band mostly contain videos produced by various terrorist organisations, aside from one video of a lecture about Ramadan. Abdullah Azzam is mentioned in the remaining videos in this time band: one is a video about early jihadi figures, which includes speeches by Abdullah Azzam (closely related to the founding members of Al Qa’ida), another is a well-known video of Abu Musab al-Suri (a suspected member of Al Qa’ida) giving advice on how to organise a (terrorist) organisation, emphasising that the terrorist cells should be as small as possible, and preferably even be composed of just one person. The final video is about jihad in Chechnya, with Azzam being quoted in the video.

### 9.2.5. 1 to 3 hours duration

The videos sampled as part of this time band include another video of jihad in Chechnya. This video appears to show propaganda messages glorifying the life of the mujahideen. Another video in this sample is a lecture by Abdullah Azzam on the history of the region of Khurasan (Persia/Afghanistan), and the Afghan jihad against the Russians. The remaining video is a lecture delivered by a Salafi scholar about Maryam (Mary), which in its content is in line with orthodox Salafi teachings.

### 9.2.6. No known duration

The videos included within this duration band of the sample include similar types of video content as the videos within the specified time bands. The shorter videos (e.g. less than three minutes in length) are, in the majority, depictions of terrorist attacks. Two videos are produced by Al Qa’ida’s media branch, As Sahab – one is about the insults directed towards the Prophet Muhammad through caricatures, and the second shows an attack taking place in Afghanistan.

Another sampled video includes a propaganda movie by the Salahudeen al Ayoubi battalion<sup>402</sup> showing multiple types of attacks on Western forces, and with anasheed and extracts of the Qur'an playing throughout the video.

The remaining videos feature Salafi scholars; one is about the umrah (lesser pilgrimage), and is in line with orthodox Salafi teachings, and the other shows a Salafi scholar being criticised for not denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups as heretical, according to Salafi beliefs.

### 9.3. Video sample analysis

This section discusses the results emerging from the human-based review of the second sample of video files generated under Phase II of the study, and is structured according to the different duration bands employed to assemble the sample.

#### 9.3.1. 0 to 3 minutes duration

A total of 35 videos in this time band were reviewed. It is possible to identify the date of one of the videos in the sample, which indicates it was filmed in 2001. The sample includes some discriminatory (against certain Muslims) and terrorist content. Some videos are produced by affiliate (e.g. Islamic State in Iraq, Ansar al-Islam) and non-affiliate groups (e.g. Ansar al-Sunna), and include various jihadi content, including segments of people wielding weapons. Some of the videos contain more violent content – such as the shooting of two men (presumably hostages). However, these are the minority. There are also videos by Shia scholars or lecturers discussing Shia matters of faith; in one instance, one of these videos has anti-Sunni sentiment. Other videos include 'home videos' of children, or videos filmed of people with no context added to them.

Overall, almost none of the videos included in the 0 to 3 minutes time band appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources. A wide array of videos reviewed might have been either downloaded from (or uploaded to) YouTube. Furthermore, a number of additional videos are professionally edited, suggesting that they had been prepared and likely distributed for wide visibility and propaganda purposes. Examples reviewed include videos from the Islamic State in Iraq, Jamaat Ansar al-Sunna, and Al-Ansar, and other videos with the logo of terrorist groups' media organisations, such as As-Sahab.<sup>403</sup>

Other videos show individuals giving short talks with microphones in front of them. Despite the intimate setting, the style in which the video is filmed and the microphone indicate that these videos were intended to be shared. Several similar tutorial videos on how to use various computer functions indicate that these were prepared for wider consumption.

Finally, a handful of videos reviewed in this time band appear to have been filmed on cell phones or hand-held cameras and show no signs of editing. Some of these videos include videos of children that might have been filmed in the Abbottabad compound. Nonetheless, the content of these videos is of low relevance to the purpose and subject matter of the study.

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<sup>402</sup> Militant terrorist group in Iraq.

<sup>403</sup> The media arm of Al Qa'ida.

### 9.3.2. 3 to 10 minutes duration

A total of 80 videos in this time band were reviewed. The videos included in this sample include videos from Al Qa'ida and various Al Qa'ida affiliate groups, including the Islamic Army in Iraq, Jaysh al-Ummah, Ansar al-Sunnah, Tawheed and Jihad, and the Islamic State in Iraq. Many of these videos contain pro-jihadist messages (e.g. lectures about Muslims being oppressed and therefore the need for jihad). Others contain footage of attacks, or the aftermaths of attacks – including footage of 9/11 – such as a video that had been made for the third anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Others appear to be propaganda videos, showing men training. Other videos feature slandering of Saudi Arabia and Muslim rulers more generally.

Videos included in this time band contain more graphic content compared to other time bands, often showing individuals being killed, generally by beheading. Some videos also contain pro-Palestine (and at times anti-Israel) material. Some of the videos contain religious but non-extremist content, such as lectures or recitations from the Qur'an. There are again also several videos that appear to have been shot within the compound or by individuals interested in showing the daily lives of their children to those who received these files. Indeed, several of the videos assessed as part of the sampling strategy show segments of daily life filmed in or around what could be the Abbottabad compound. Four of these videos are included in the analysis, but the remaining 14 videos that were identified as possibly having been filmed in or around the compound were excluded, due to the fact that most do not contain any spoken words. No spoken words or identities of people are made apparent in these videos – for example, some of these videos include segments of nature or animals, including a short video of a very wet garden or patio, or of the trees around what could be the Abbottabad compound. Some of the videos show what could be the interior of the Abbottabad compound or a similar non-identified location. These videos feature mainly children watching TV or playing. Overall, the majority of the videos sampled that appear to be filmed in or around what could be the Abbottabad compound provide no additional information or insight in and of themselves, or further information that can help contextualise other sections of the Archive.

As with the shorter time band discussed, the majority of videos appear to stem from public sources or outlets. These include videos with very clear branding and propaganda from various terrorist groups. Other symbols used to highlight the terrorist nature behind the videos include visible jihadi flags, rifles and other weapons. Other videos indicate that they were produced by the media arms of Al Qa'ida, including Global Islamic Media Front and As-Sahab. These videos were made for propaganda purposes, and it was envisioned that they would have been widely shared.

### 9.3.3. 10 to 30 minutes duration

A total of 53 videos in this time band were reviewed. Some videos discuss various religious topics. While some of these topics cover mainstream Islamic beliefs (e.g. overview of the life of the Prophet, various lectures on Allah and traits of a good Muslim, doing hajj [pilgrimage]), others contain more extremist views directed against various non-Sunni Muslim denominations, as well as 'Jews and Crusaders'. Other videos promoting more extremist views discuss the US in negative terms and showcase pro-jihad messages and other clips inciting jihad. The videos include some produced by, and about, the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as other videos presenting biographies of various jihadists and other important militant Islamist figures. Other videos include clips of hostages, and videos about Palestine and the occupation of Palestine by Israel.

Overall, as with the shorter time bands discussed, the majority of videos in this time band appear to stem from public sources or outlets. The types of videos found in this time category are broadly similar to the time bands above. Videos by terrorist groups are common.

Other videos show signs that they might have been filmed through a cell phone or a hand-held camera, due to the lower quality and shakiness of the filming. However, in most cases these videos are of public events, and therefore do not seem to stem from any confidential setting. Finally, there are again a number of videos that appear to have been shot within the compound or by individuals interested in showing their daily lives to those who received these files within it, but which overall have no relevance to the study's subject matter.

#### 9.3.4. 30 minutes to 1 hour duration

A total of 31 videos in this time band were reviewed. It is possible to identify the date of several of the videos in the sample, which indicate they were filmed in 1989, and several dating from 2000. Videos of low relevance relate to Arabic grammar lessons. Several videos show attacks on military personnel in Iraq and military weapons. The majority of the videos are about various religious aspects, and these vary in terms of their level of extremism, some displaying conservative views whereas others have more radical views. These videos include matters relating to pilgrimage, how to interpret the Qur'an, what is 'proper' Islam and how to be Muslim, the virtues of Ramadan, and the question of democracy. Other more radical videos include discussions on Jihad and Shariah, with some discriminatory undertones to other Muslim denominations and Christians.

Overall, as with the shorter time bands discussed, the majority of videos appear to stem from public sources or outlets. Videos within this time band include additional videos from terrorist groups. There are also videos of public lectures and lessons, including conferences or press conferences. Given that these are filmed in a public setting (some of the individuals are using microphones), and that some appear to be part of a series of videos by the same person and filmed to a high standard of quality (i.e. not hand-held), it is plausible that these were intended for wider distribution.

#### 9.3.5. 1 to 3 hours duration

A total of 26 videos in this time band were reviewed. It is possible to identify the approximate time period of several of the videos in the sample, which indicate they were filmed in the 1980s and 1990s, with some dating from the early 2000s. The videos mainly discuss religious topics, at various levels of extremism. Some videos discuss aspects of religion that transcend Islam, whereas others have a more extremist nature and, for example, talk about the importance of jihad. A number of videos derive from a series on Ramadan by the Muslim Brotherhood, showcasing a number of different speakers. Other videos display anti-Western sentiment, in particular around the US involvement in the Middle East.

Overall, as with the shorter time bands discussed, the majority of videos in this time band appear to stem from public sources or outlets. As per the other time bands, the sample includes videos from terrorist groups, as well as lectures, interviews, talk shows, sermons and conference-type videos. This category also includes a number of 'compilation' videos (i.e. videos that include a number of different clips and segments from various videos).

### 9.3.6. No known duration

A total of 42 videos in this time band were reviewed. Most of the videos sampled as part of this time band appear to originate from various terrorist groups or Al Qa'ida affiliates (e.g. Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Al Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers, Iraqi Islamic Resistance Front), and depict instances of jihadi terrorism. Mostly, these are centred around explosions and rocket launches; far fewer centre upon more gruesome scenes (e.g. executing or beheading prisoners). Many of these videos appear to be filmed in, or deal with, Iraq. Some of the videos speak critically of Shia Muslims, or mock them. One video contains criticism of the Al Saud, the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, labelling them as 'non-believers' and criticising their treatment of mujahideen. Other videos have religious – though not extremist – content. This includes recitation from the Qur'an, or videos of Mecca.

Overall, as with the shorter time bands discussed, the majority of videos in this time band appear to stem from public sources or outlets. The majority of these appear to be propaganda material from terrorist groups. Other videos include lectures or sermons, or well-compiled and edited videos exhibiting a degree of professionalism in production and their intent for public release. Videos in this sample also include Friday sermons, which appear to have been filmed using high-quality cameras.

## 9.4. Summary and conclusions

Overall, the review of video transcripts and the analysis of videos conducted under the study suggests that the majority of video files included in the Phase II samples focus on issues of terrorism, extremist propaganda, religion and politics. The majority of the videos with a terrorist or jihadi angle tend to display use of high-calibre weapons and improvised explosive devices, as well as executions and jihadists giving speeches. Videos reviewed also include a number of religious lectures that are not always aligned with extremist views, but more broadly with orthodox perspectives.

More broadly, most of the recordings included in the study sample appear to be public and non-sensitive or private in their content. A limited number of videos appear to have been shot within the Abbottabad compound – or by individuals sharing videos with the compound inhabitants – and are likely to be private videos.

The videos sampled provide an overview of certain ideological elements pertaining to Al Qa'ida. They contain videos from various affiliate organisations, and the themes and approach taken by the videos are all quite similar, in that they showcase Islamist propaganda centred around strength of the militant groups, encouraging jihad, and anti-American and Jewish views.

Finally, the videos sampled do not provide any specific information concerning Al Qa'ida as an organisation or about its strategy and that of its affiliate groups, beyond tactical approaches displayed in propaganda pieces. Overall, the video review appears to have limited potential as regards generating novel insights and knowledge about Al Qa'ida, its organisation, strategy, ideology and relation to the broader phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism through further research.



## 10. Text analysis

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This chapter provides an overview of the approach taken to analyse the text cluster of the Archive. It opens with a detailed overview of the methodology and tools employed (Section 10.1), discusses emerging findings and results from the analysis of different text clusters (Section 10.2), then summarises conclusions drawn by the study team that might inform the responses to Phase II research questions (Section 10.3).

### 10.1. Overview of the research approach and limitations

The text cluster of the Archive comprises more than 42,000 files. Based on their reported file type, these can be classified as displayed in Table 10.1.

**Table 10.1 Archive video files distribution by length bands**

| Source                                           | Number of files |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Text files                                       | 18,498 files    |
| Microsoft Office files converted into PDF format | 24,168 files    |

In addition to these, as discussed in previous chapters, the study team also analysed the audio (64 files), video (92 files) and Bin Laden journal transcripts (one 200+page document) generated earlier in the project as part of the text cluster assessment. Thereafter, all files assessed as part of the text analysis are referred to as ‘text files’ (with one file referring to one document, or one transcript, for example).

To investigate the potential of the text cluster to yield relevant insights on Al Qa’ida through further research, the study team utilised an exploratory machine-learning approach that was designed to help structure and characterise the documents included in the Archive.

To conduct this analysis the study team employed RAND-Lex, a proprietary suite of analytic tools developed by RAND researchers to perform rigorous and complex text analytics and machine learning. RAND-Lex enables the adoption of a holistic approach to text analysis with built-in statistical testing and machine-learning modules, and is distinct from most approaches to text analysis. In addition to using word-level (*semantic*) features, RAND-Lex uses social/functional (*pragmatic*) language features, in both analytic



tests and machine-learning. RAND-Lex has been used in a variety of national security research projects to analyse large text collections using scalable analytic capabilities.<sup>404</sup>

RAND-Lex's ability to use pragmatic language features in addition to semantic features meant our analysis could discover meaningful text groupings by sociocultural meaning and purpose, not just by topic. RAND-Lex is currently comprised of five modules, each of which allows the user to perform different tasks:

- **Lexical Analysis Module:** word-level tests to determine what text data sets are *about*.
- **Stance Analysis Module:** style- and phrasing-level tests to detect pragmatic stance<sup>405</sup> and sentiment in Modern Standard Arabic, English, and Russian.
- **LDA Topic Modelling Module:** top-level detection of latent themes and topics in text data sets.
- **Text Clustering Module:** hierarchical clustering algorithm using both words and stance features to cluster on, with cluster labelling to show the principle words/stance used to create each cluster, thus enhancing interpretability.
- **Text Classification Module:** A variety of supervised algorithms for classifying texts, using both words and stance features for classification.

RAND-Lex leverages, but does not replace, human analysis. RAND-Lex tools are not able to discern meaning, but rather enable human analysis to interpret results stemming from much larger corpora than would be otherwise possible to do at once. Although machines are unable to generate sophisticated analysis of meaning or to reproduce the contextual meaning-making of human reading, their analysis of text is reliable (not biased or variable in attention in the way human reading can be). As such, using hybrid human and machine approaches to analyse large qualitative text data sets has now emerged as a valuable practice. Hybrid approaches to qualitative data using both traditional human and software-based text mining are compatible and complementary. Both approaches are inductive and grounded in data, challenging analysts' preconceptions, while increasing the validity and reliability that qualitative analysis seeks, particularly at scale.<sup>406</sup>

**During Phase II of the project, the study team employed RAND-Lex's unsupervised clustering module to create meaningful collections of data for analysis from the broader text cluster of the Archive.** The RAND-Lex clustering module is an unsupervised machine-learning module that lets users discover possible classes of text objects by word or stance similarity. Unlike classification, in clustering there is no ground truth, measure of accuracy or recall. Instead, clustering should be seen in dichotomous terms as *useful vs less useful*, or *insight producing vs not illuminating*. Clustering is thus an exploratory method that can be a helpful first step towards building a classifier model. Unlike clustering approaches that use only word terms (and thus only semantic content), the RAND-Lex clustering module allows for weighted clustering using words and stance, thus allowing for insight that accounts for purpose and social meaning, as well as topic. As regards stance, the clustering module leverages RAND-Lex's unique capability to employ a lexico-grammatical

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<sup>404</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016); Helmus et al. (2018); Marcellino et al. (2020).

<sup>405</sup> Examples of stance categories include *future* and *past*, *certainty* and *uncertainty*, *emotions* (sadness, anger, fear, regret, apology, general negativity and general positivity), *social goods* and *ills*, *concrete objects* and *properties*, and *abstract concepts*.

<sup>406</sup> Yu et al. (2011).

linguistic level of analysis in Arabic. In particular, the module focuses on the *stance* dimension of each text's rhetoric, which is visible by detection of statistically meaningful variations in style. Stance detects a range of attitude, values and effects. Stance analysis has been found to be valid across a wide range of text problems, including linguistic forensics,<sup>407</sup> automatic text classification tasks, cross-cultural English as a second language instruction,<sup>408</sup> consumer sentiment analysis<sup>409</sup> and strategic communication analysis.<sup>410</sup>

**RAND-Lex's ability to use pragmatic language features in addition to semantic features was adopted to enable the study team to discover meaningful text groupings and clusters by sociocultural meaning and purpose,** not just topic or text and file format. Text groupings and clusters generated via machine-based algorithms were then reviewed by the study team with a view to identifying clusters and groupings that could generate new insights on Al Qa'ida through further research.

The 'unsupervised' aspect of the clustering analysis means that 'the algorithm "clusters" documents based on similarity to each other and dissimilarity to the rest of the data set', whereas in supervised clustering, there would be human input in terms of providing the algorithm with a labelled data set.<sup>411</sup> RAND-Lex uses a 'proprietary, nested version of K-means clustering',<sup>412</sup> a variation of an established method used in unsupervised clustering.<sup>413</sup>

Several analyses were run on the text cluster, using different settings to identify empirically what balance and approach yielded the clearest results. The following section of this chapter discusses the main results emerging from analyses conducted with the settings presented in Table 10.2.

The 'frequency' setting presented in Table 10.2 indicates the maximum frequency with which a certain word may be present in the text corpus for the algorithm to still consider it as significant. This setting enables RAND-Lex to overlook very common words that function as noise rather than signal. The singular value decomposition (SVD) parameter enabled us to reduce the dimensionality of the data, a kind of data reduction necessary for large-scale analysis. Finally, the parameters for Term Frequency over Inverse Document Frequency (TFIDF) and Stance<sup>414</sup> enabled researchers to adjust the weight and importance that the classifier should give to key words vs stance during its analysis.

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<sup>407</sup> Airoidi et al. (2006).

<sup>408</sup> Yu et al. (2011).

<sup>409</sup> Bai (2011).

<sup>410</sup> Marcellino (2015).

<sup>411</sup> Marcellino (2019, 186).

<sup>412</sup> Marcellino (2019, 190). K-means clustering is an algorithm that groups similar data together, in order to show what patterns are present in any given data set. To do so, K-means clustering 'clusters', or brings together, similar data points in a number of different clusters, or groups.

<sup>413</sup> Jain (2010).

<sup>414</sup> 'Stance' in RAND-Lex uses an expert dictionary of words and phrases arranged in 121 language categories (emotions, social relationships, values, temporality, etc.) to statistically describe the stance or attitudinal dimension of text collections. Stance is the rhetorical, functional level of language, whereas 'terms' are at the semantic, content level of language ('lexis' in linguistics). The stance model used in RAND-Lex comes from rhetoric and functional linguistics, and while the original stance model was developed at Carnegie Mellon University, RAND has developed stance dictionaries in native Russian and Arabic.

**Table 10.2 RAND-Lex settings for text clustering analysis conducted**

| Analysis # | Frequency | SVD | TFIDF | Stance |
|------------|-----------|-----|-------|--------|
| 1          | 60        | 20  | 1     | 0      |
| 2          | 60        | 20  | 0     | 1      |
| 3          | 60        | 20  | 0.5   | 0.5    |

Some of the clusters have overlapping content. This is due to the way in which similarity between the files is assessed, which is done via K-means clustering, which defines  $K$  centroids, and then assigns each file to the centroid it is closest to in that space. Similarity is measured by distance to each cluster's centroid. Every file is described as a vector: a string of multiple integers that can be used to plot the file in space, and measure how far to the nearest (most similar) centroid. Within RAND-Lex, distance to centroids is measured using Euclidian distance (equivalent to triangle inequality, L2 Norm, straight-line distance), along both word counts and stance counts, and the weighting chosen for the clustering run determines the weighting of words/stance in the vector.

#### 10.1.1. Limitations

Certain limitations, caveats and assumptions that underpin the text cluster analysis methodology and the results of the work discussed in this chapter should be noted.

**File names.** In order to facilitate the processing of files included in the text Archive by RAND-Lex, it was necessary to apply new file names that featured unique numeric IDs. RAND-Lex is not designed to process file names with more than 100 characters or that include Arabic letters, two features that were common among the naming of Archive text files. The following sections of this document discuss results of leveraging the numeric IDs assigned by the study team to differentiate files, and to improve readability and reduce length of the text. A table providing an overview of the correspondence between numerical IDs employed in the study and the original file names with which files are known in the Archive is provided in Annex B to this report.

**Processing text files through an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software.** In order to facilitate the processing of files included in the text Archive by RAND-Lex, it was necessary to pre-process the text files through OCR software. To this end, after testing multiple software solutions the study team employed ABBYY FineReader 15 software. This software was selected due to its higher degree of accuracy in OCR for Arabic script, as well as its ability to conduct batch processing. While throughout the project the software produced reliable high-quality outputs when processing Arabic, it should nonetheless be noted that it performed with a margin of error and at times could not recognise all characters or document types (e.g. if the document included in the Archive was of low quality/resolution or if the original font was difficult to decipher). As such, some documents included in the Archive might only have been partly processed due to technical constraints in current OCR software capabilities for Arabic script. Due to the large number of files present in the Archive, it was not possible to investigate each file individually, however the large number of files in the Archive and the order of magnitude errors reported by the software during data preparation procedures indicate that this was not statistically significant.

**Analysis scope.** The next sections discuss the results of the work conducted on the text cluster during Phase II of the study. This analysis does not provide a comprehensive in-depth assessment of all text files included in the Archive and of their significance vis-à-vis current knowledge on Al Qa'ida and Jihadi terrorism. Rather, in line with the purpose and scope of Phase II of the project, the analysis conducted was designed to characterise and understand the composition of the Archive text cluster as a whole and to assess the potential for different subsets and segments of the cluster to yield new insights on Al Qa'ida through further research. As such, the analysis discussed in the next pages should be taken only as a first necessary step into a broader process required to analyse the text collection of the Bin Laden Archive.

## 10.2. Overview of text clusters identified and composition

The following sections present an overview of the results of the analysis conducted on the Archive text cluster through the auto-clustering feature of the RAND-Lex platform. In particular, Sections 10.2.1 and Section 10.2.2 present an overview of the most meaningful clusters generated by RAND-Lex during its analysis and characterise their content and potential relevance for generating new insights on Al Qa'ida through further research. Each file is assigned to only one cluster. It should be noted that due to resource requirements associated with the running of the RAND-Lex clustering function on a corpus of the size and scope of the Archive text cluster, it was necessary to run analyses on the Archive by organising it into two sub-clusters. The content of these sub-clusters is discussed in Sections 10.2.1 and 10.2.2.

The clustering approach was fruitful. The K-means clustering algorithm, when weighted to include stance, produced many clusters of documents that were recognizable to our human analysts. The ability to cluster many documents in Arabic, not merely by keywords,<sup>415</sup> but by genre and purpose, serves two important functions. First is the leveraging of human labour: combing through tens of thousands of Arabic documents to find the 1,000–2,000 relevant documents is a waste of scarce expert ability. Second is the ability of machines to detect and suggest meaningful groupings that can in turn inform a robust, useful typology. In essence, we were able to use machine learning to separate wheat from chaff and get an empirical head-start in creating meaning from a mass of unstructured data too large for human-only analysis.

### 10.2.1. Text and Converted Microsoft Office files

First, the study team conducted an analysis and characterisation of the 'Text' collection of part of the 'Converted Microsoft Office files' segment of the text cluster. This included a total of 21,125 files. All files were allocated a numeric ID to facilitate the analysis (the original file names can be found in Annex provided to the project sponsor). As discussed in Section 10.1, different analyses were run using different parameters, but it was found that the parameters included in Table 10.3 returned the clearest results. The results of the clustering on these sets of files produced a total of 20 clusters. The resulting clusters have varying levels of pertinence to the study. For example, some clusters are groups of files that have had their content removed by the CIA. We include here a selection of clusters to demonstrate the variety found in the text files but

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<sup>415</sup> Keywords are one of the ways in which the various clusters of data can be differentiated from one another. They do not play an important role in defining the cluster itself or in explaining its purpose or value.

have avoided repetition when discussing non-relevant clusters (e.g. clusters of files that have had their content removed by the CIA). The most significant clusters generated are discussed in the sections below.

**Table 10.3 Analysis parameters employed for Text and Converted Microsoft Office files analysis**

| Analysis parameters overview |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Frequency                    | 60 |
| SVD                          | 20 |
| TFIDF                        | 1  |
| Stance                       | 0  |

### Cluster 1

Table 10.4 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the first cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.4 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview |                                                             |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #1                                                          |
| Keywords                 | Abbottabad/Converted pdf/Abbottabad compound/File/Converted |
| Stance                   | Numbers/Aside                                               |
| Total files in cluster   | 7,598                                                       |

This cluster appears to primarily comprise content that has been removed from files due to malware found by the CIA, or files that were corrupted or converted to a PDF file. As examples, files 8864, 9028 and 9130 all contain the same content, stating ‘The contents of this file have been removed because it either contains malware, is an operating system file, executable, corrupted, or was converted to a PDF file. Converted PDF files are listed in the Converted Documents section of the Abbottabad Compound website’. This is consistent with the information provided by the CIA on their website, which states that they converted a number of Microsoft Office Word documents.<sup>416</sup>

Overall, this cluster appears to possess no relevance for further research because the content of these files has been removed.

### Cluster 2

Table 10.5 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the second cluster generated under the analysis.

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<sup>416</sup> See CIA (2017).

Table 10.5 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                              |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #2                           |
| Keywords                 | 417 انل / ان / على / من / يف |
| Stance                   | Negativity/AbstractConcepts  |
| Total files in cluster   | 2,082                        |

This cluster appears to comprise content from Arabic newspapers in general, and copies of the Al Quds Al Araby newspaper in particular. For example, files 9202, 10269 and 11915 all contain articles from different dates between 2006 and 2007, published in the Al Quds Al Araby newspaper.

Overall, this cluster appears to possess little relevance for potential further research due to the fact that the majority of the content of this cluster pertains to material contained in the public domain, and that it provides little significant potential for understanding why Bin Laden or other members of the compound chose to save these specific files, other than for the purpose of reading news and developments at the time in which these newspapers were published.

#### Cluster 4

Table 10.6 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the fourth cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.6 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                              |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #4                           |
| Keywords                 | 418 انل / ان / على / من / يف |
| Stance                   | Negativity/AbstractConcepts  |
| Total files in cluster   | 664                          |

As per cluster #2, this cluster appears to primarily comprise content from Arabic newspapers. For example, files 9514, 12535 and 17754 all contain copies of the Al Quds al Araby newspaper published on different dates during 2006.

Overall, this cluster appears to possess little relevance for potential further research due to the fact that the majority of the content of this cluster pertains to material contained in the public domain, and that it

<sup>417</sup> Translation: انل – to; ان – that; على – on/to; من – from; يف – in.

<sup>418</sup> Translation: انل – to; ان – that; على – on/to; من – from; يف – in.

provides little significant potential for understanding why Bin Laden or other members of the compound chose to save these specific files.

## Cluster 5

Table 10.7 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the fifth cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.7 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview      |                                         |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>Cluster</b>                | #5                                      |
| <b>Keywords</b>               | <sup>419</sup> ••/Www/Com/Http www/Http |
| <b>Stance</b>                 | LangRef/AbstractConcepts                |
| <b>Total files in cluster</b> | 578                                     |

This cluster primarily comprised extracts from the Qur'an. For example, files 8964, 13622 and 5051 are all pages from the Qur'an. File 8964 features an extract from Chapter 6 (Al-Anam – 'The Cattle'), file 13622 is an extract from Chapter 48 (Al-Fath – 'Victory, Triumph'), while file 5051 is an extract from Chapter 56 (Al-Waqiah – 'The Event' or 'The Inevitable').

Overall, this cluster appears to possess little relevance for potential further research due to the fact that the majority of the content of this cluster pertains to material contained in the public domain, and that hardly any insight could be generated from knowledge that Bin Laden or other members of the compound had electronic copies of the Qur'an on their devices.

## Cluster 8

Table 10.8 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the eighth cluster generated under the analysis.

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<sup>419</sup> Translation: •• – 00.

Table 10.8 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                              |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #8                                           |
| Keywords                 | الله <sup>420</sup> إلى / على / من / في      |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts             |
| Total files in cluster   | 459                                          |
| Sub-cluster #1           |                                              |
| Keywords                 | الله <sup>421</sup> إلى / على / من / في      |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts             |
| Total files in cluster   | 418                                          |
| Sub-cluster #2           |                                              |
| Keywords                 | الله <sup>422</sup> على / إلى / بن / من / في |
| Stance                   | PersonProperty/AbstractConcepts              |
| Total files in cluster   | 41                                           |

This cluster is comprised of two sub-clusters. The first sub-cluster appears to primarily comprise of religiously oriented material. This includes material with a terrorist or jihadi angle, and material with ideological concepts linked to Al Qa'ida or other similar groups. This sub-cluster also appears to contain material from scholars who have been influential in extremist circles, such as Nasir al-Fahd (file 18807), a Saudi Arabian scholar who has publicly supported jihad against the United States.

Examples of files in this sub-cluster include file 18711, a book titled *Comments Of The Scholars And Preachers Clarifying The Apostasy Of The One Who Alters The Shariah From The Oppressive Rulers: A Collection Of More Than 200 Fatwas And Comments*, and file 15019, another book titled *Requirements of Jihad*, by an individual called Saleh al-Fawzan. Both files indicate extremist content in-line with Al Qa'ida's ideology. Other files include a fatwa or article by an individual called Dr Ahmed bin Abdel Karim Najeeb on the 'obligation of the Muslims to release prisoners from the Crusader prisons' (file 18800), and a file outlining a question and answer session with Sulaiman bin Nasr al-Alwan about suicide operations (file 19535).

The second sub-cluster appears to primarily comprise similar files and content as the first sub-cluster, with material that is religiously oriented. However, in contrast to the first sub-cluster, the majority of the documents in this sub-cluster appear to be in-line with standard orthodox teachings, with a minority of documents containing terrorist or pro-jihadist material. This sub-cluster for example includes publications

<sup>420</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); إلى – to; على – on/to; من – from; في – in.

<sup>421</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); إلى – to; على – on/to; من – from; في – in.

<sup>422</sup> Translation: إلى – to; على – on/to; من – from; في – in; بن – the son of.



from Minbar Tawheed Wal Jihad (a militant jihadist group) and The Islamic State in Iraq, although the content appears to be in-line with Islamic orthodox teachings, or lessons from battles that took place in Islamic history.

Examples of files included within this sub-cluster include several books or book sections: file 18568 appears to be a section of a book on religious matters, with some content focused on the companions of the Prophet Muhammed; file 21341 contains another book titled *Translation Of Martyrs Of Islamic Call In The Modern Era – Part 1*, which was collected and prepared by an individual named Abdul Qadir al Ibaar; and file 4457 appears to be a volume of a book describing Islamic historical conquests. File 11357 contains a publication by The Islamic State in Iraq about the battles of the Prophet.

Overall, this cluster and its two sub-clusters **appear to possess material that might be potentially significant and worth in-depth investigation during potential further research.** This is because both clusters might contain material that is not publicly available. The first sub-cluster in particular contains material with more ideological and extremist material that might merit a more in-depth investigation, compared to the second sub-cluster.

## Cluster 9

Table 10.9 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the ninth cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.9 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #9                       |
| Keywords                 | آل /١٠/ li/ ٠٠ /٠٠٠      |
| Stance                   | Numbers/AbstractConcepts |
| Total files in cluster   | 390                      |
| Sub-cluster #1           |                          |
| Keywords                 | آل /١٠/ li/ ٠٠ /٠٠٠-     |
| Stance                   | LangRef/AbstractConcepts |
| Total files in cluster   |                          |
| Sub-cluster #2           |                          |
| Keywords                 | آل /١٠/ li/ ٠٠ /٠٠٠-     |
| Stance                   | LangRef/AbstractConcepts |
| Total files in cluster   |                          |
| Sub-cluster #3           |                          |
| Keywords                 | آل /١٠/ li/ ٠٠ /٠٠٠-     |
| Stance                   | Numbers/AbstractConcepts |
| Total files in cluster   |                          |

This cluster is comprised of three sub-clusters. The first sub-cluster appears to primarily comprise documents that contain a range of ASCII characters, or documents that have been redacted. For example, files 20928 and 20034 only contain unreadable ASCII characters.

The second sub-cluster is largely similar to the first in that it appears to primarily comprise documents that contain a range of ASCII characters or redacted material. However, it also contains some documents with an ideological or pro-jihadist bend. For example, file 20117 is a fatwa about the permissibility of joining groups such as the Ba'ath party for jihad against the invaders. However, the majority of this fatwa has been lost, either through redaction or in the processing of the file, and the text included is largely incomplete.<sup>423</sup> A further file shows a section of a magazine or periodical, with the title indicating that it is reporting events from 'jihadi operations in the land of war' (file 8058). However, as with file 20117, this file is incomplete, either due to the document having been redacted or content lost through the processing of the file.

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<sup>423</sup> This is likely linked to the fact that the computer used in the Abbottabad Compound was using an old or fake version of Word, and thus led to issues in terms of file conversions, which is one of the reasons why the CIA had to convert thousands of Word documents into PDFs. Source: interview with Thomas Joscelyn, 22 January 2020.

The third sub-cluster is similar to the second sub-cluster in that it comprises both documents that contain a range of ASCII characters or redacted material and documents with an ideological or pro-jihadist nature, but which have been redacted or had their content lost through the processing of the file. For example, file 12969 appears to be a book titled *Destruction of America*, however as with the material in the second sub-cluster, the contents appear to have been lost, either through redaction or processing of the file. As a result, the file is incomplete.

The issues that appear to be pervasive across all three sub-clusters are evidenced in the keywords that have been identified, which are comprised of numbers (main zeros) and the word ‘the’. Overall, while some of the material, particularly in the second and third sub-clusters, might be of interest for further in-depth investigation, the redacted or corrupt nature of the large majority of the documents reduces the potential that they could help generate insights during potential future research.

## Cluster 11

Table 10.10 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 11<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.10 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview      |                              |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Cluster</b>                | #11                          |
| <b>Keywords</b>               | 424اليت / أن / على / من / يف |
| <b>Stance</b>                 | Negativity/AbstractConcepts  |
| <b>Total files in cluster</b> | 601                          |

As with previous clusters, this cluster appears to primarily comprise articles from Arabic newspapers. Overall, this cluster appears to possess little relevance for potential further research due to the fact that the majority of the content of this cluster pertains to material contained in the public domain, and that it provides little significant potential for understanding why Bin Laden or other members of the compound chose to save these specific files.

## Cluster 12

Table 10.11 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 12<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

<sup>424</sup> Translation: اليت – wish; أن – that; على – on/to; من – from; يف – in.

Table 10.11 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #12                                 |
| Keywords                 | إلى/ أن/ على/ من/ في <sup>425</sup> |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts    |
| Total files in cluster   | 395                                 |

This cluster appears to comprise a variety of different files whose commonality appears to be a focus on Egypt and Egyptian authors (e.g. Muhammad Qutb, Muhammad Jalal Kishk and Zagloul Najjar, who are mentioned in files 18592, 18735 and 19144 respectively). The files include a large number of newspaper articles as per previous files, but also documents with a historical religious element, standard religious texts – such as tafsir commentaries (i.e. explanations of the Qur'an) – and speeches and/or letters from Bin Laden pertaining to the Arab Spring.

Examples of files contained within this cluster include file 18080, which is a publication by Ansar al-Sunna on 'American concentration camps'. This publication appears to be part of a series, with this specific edition focusing on house raids by American forces in Iraq. The publication contains pro-jihadist references. File 18551 appears to be a speech or letter to the Arab people about the Arab Spring revolutions and how they must utilise this opportunity to uncover truth. The document addresses the Egyptian and Yemeni revolutions directly, and the wording 'Oh children of the Islamic nation' is used on a number of occasions. The document speaks of the necessity in taking advantage of this historical opportunity (presumably the revolutions). It also stresses the importance of correcting the misguided understandings that have become prevalent over recent decades, and how Muhammad Qutb's books would be useful in this regard. Wider social issues, such as water and food crises are mentioned. While it is not explicit in the file, it is likely that the author or intended orator was Bin Laden, based on similarities between the contents of this file and descriptions in the Bin Laden journal of the drafting of a statement and socioeconomic issues – such as issues around water shortages (see Chapter 12 of this report for further details on this document).

There are several other files – with content similar to file 18551 – that likely originate from Bin Laden. One such file is 18608, which is another speech or letter focusing on Egypt. This specific document details the importance of Egypt to the 'Islamic nation', stating that Egypt 'produced the Mujahid leader Mohammed Ata who attacked the "head of disbelief" and Khaled Islam who killed the previous agent who made way for the current agent.' The document also includes that there is 'no doubt Egypt will produce more heroes like those two who will take the decision to strike the biggest agent of disbelief in our lands.' The document concludes with the author stating that the level of oppression has reached an intolerable level in the Arab and Muslim lands. The author justifies fighting and dying against such oppressors as those who sacrifice themselves in this path are martyrs. Another file, 19146, contains a written version of a speech from a video

<sup>425</sup> Translation: أن – that; في – in; على – on/to; من – to; إلى – to.

of Bin Laden addressing the American people. A final example is file 20369, whose content relates to the revolutions and the offering of advice to ensure their success.

Overall, **this cluster might contain documents that could provide relevant new insights on Al Qa'ida through further research.** The range of files contained in this cluster appears to include inter alia a range of speeches and letters likely penned by Bin Laden himself and with a common focus or reference on Egypt. Further in-depth research on this cluster could be conducted to identify further primary sources and documents.

### Cluster 13

Table 10.12 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 13<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.12 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #13                            |
| Keywords                 | في/ان/على/من/يف <sup>426</sup> |
| Stance                   | Negativity/AbstractConcepts    |
| Total files in cluster   | 328                            |

This cluster appears to primarily comprise of newspaper articles, but it also contains some ideological and extremist material, and documents pertaining to orthodox religious teachings on topics like the Hajj (pilgrimage – file 18367), tafsir (file 19170) and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence – file 19511). The keywords identified as part of this cluster do not provide an additional indication as to the commonality linking the documents within this cluster, however it is likely to be the Islamic, and in some cases jihadist, nature of the documents.

Examples of files included in this cluster include file 13799, an article by Abu Musab al-Najdi titled: 'Custodian of the two holy sanctuaries: is he really that?', which appears to be an anti-Saudi monarchy article about Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz (the former king of Saudi Arabia). At the end of the article the author requests that this article is spread to all jihadi forums. File 18348 features a booklet by Abdel Moneim Aboul Futuh titled *The Concept Of An Islamic State – Between Practise And Renewal*, which is dated from 2004. Another file contains an extract from a book by Abdul Monim Mustafa Haleem (Abu Baseer) titled *(Islamic) Ruling Of The Spy* (file 21063).

Overall, **this cluster might contain documents that could provide novel insights on Al Qa'ida through further research,** as it contains material that is ideological in nature, and therefore might provide further information around Al Qai'da's ideology. However, **the novelty of the insights might be limited should this material already be publicly available, which is likely given that some of these are books or contain**

<sup>426</sup> Translation: ان – that; في – in; على – on/to; من – from; يف – in.

**reference to wider circulation.** Therefore, if this cluster is selected for further investigation, it is suggested that it be considered a ‘second priority’ cluster for investigation.

## Cluster 14

Table 10.13 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 14<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.13 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview |                                    |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #14                                |
| Keywords                 | إلى/على/الله/من/في <sup>427</sup>  |
| Stance                   | AbstractConcepts/CommonAuthorities |
| Total files in cluster   | 429                                |

This cluster appears to primarily comprise documents covering a range of religious topics. Files include, for example, files 15619 and 16911, which are governmental curricula textbooks about tafsir, and file 18401 on purification of the heart (against spiritual diseases). There are also a number of documents with a more extremist nature, including file 9884, an article by Tawheed wal Jihad (a militant jihadist group) discussing various arrogant people. The article gives examples throughout Islamic history of people who are considered as arrogant, such as Pharaohs, Nimrod and Sodom. File 10919 originates from the Al Buraq Islamic Network and discusses the group’s stance on a statement issued by The Islamic Army of Iraq in response to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, and the differences and issues between The Islamic Army of Iraq and The Islamic State in Iraq.

There are also a number of books or pamphlets, including one by Omar al-Baghdadi (file 17719), a book by Sulaiman bin Nasr al-Alwan titled *Now: Victory Is Close* (file 17755), and a book by Yusuf Bin Saleh al-Ayer titled *Please Prostrate/Grovel Secretly* (file 18525).

Overall, **this cluster might contain documents that could provide novel insights through further research**, as it contains material that is ideological in nature, and therefore might provide further information around Al Qa’ida’s ideology. However, as with the previous cluster, **the novelty of the insights might be limited as it appears likely that the files contained in this cluster are public facing documents.** Therefore, if this cluster is selected for further investigation, it is suggested that it be considered a ‘second priority’ cluster for investigation.

## Cluster 15

Table 10.14 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 15<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

<sup>427</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); إلى – to; على – on/to; من – from; في – in.

Table 10.14 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                         |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #15                                     |
| Keywords                 | عن <sup>428</sup> / الله / بن / من / في |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/PersonProperty          |
| Total files in cluster   | 261                                     |

This cluster appears to primarily comprise files with religious content. This includes a collection of hadith about the blessings of the Levant (file 16247), extracts from the Qur'an (files 18480, 18491, 18677) and tafsir (file 18587). Unlike other clusters, this cluster contains fewer items with a jihadist angle. Nonetheless, it does include files with more radical content, including file 9747, which features an interview with Sulaiman Nasr al-Alwan (a radical Saudi Arabian scholar) about divorce, and file 13218, which contains a pamphlet for Tawheed wal Jihad by Sheikh Abu Hamam Bakr bin Abdul Aziz al-Athari.

Overall, **while this cluster contains documents whose subject matter might be of interest in the context of the study, it does not appear that it would provide novel insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research**, given that the content of the cluster appears to feature mainly previously publicly distributed content and documents.

## Cluster 16

Table 10.15 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 16<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.15 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                          |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #16                                      |
| Keywords                 | أن <sup>429</sup> / على / الله / من / في |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts         |
| Total files in cluster   | 327                                      |

As with cluster #15, this cluster appears primarily to comprise files with religious content and to include primarily jihadi militant authors. For example, this cluster includes a book by Ibn al-Qayim titled *Names of God* (file 9906), a book by Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad titled *Thieves Of Wasatiyya: A Response To The Conference In Nouakchott* (file 13848), an article by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, an influential jihadist writer, titled *My Lord prison is more beloved to me than that which they call me to*, written while he was in

<sup>428</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); من – from; في – in; عن – about/on; بن – the son of.

<sup>429</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); على – on/to; من – to; في – in; أن – that.

prison and based on a chapter of the Qur'an (file 15358), and an article by Ayman al Zawahiri responding to Nasr al-Din Al-Albani's defence of the rulers (file 17749).

Overall, while **this cluster contains items that might be of interest to the subject matter of the study, but similarly to the cluster above it does not appear that it would provide novel insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research**, given that the content of the cluster appears to feature mainly publicly distributed content and documents.

## Cluster 19

Table 10.16 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 19th cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.16 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                    |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #19                                |
| Keywords                 | 430 على / الله / التوحيد / من / في |
| Stance                   | CommonAuthorities/AbstractConcepts |
| Total files in cluster   | 327                                |

This cluster appears to primarily comprise files with religious content and other miscellaneous topics. For example, file 10672 contains a book titled *Islam: Between The Scholars And The Rulers*, from 1965, while file 10395 contains the book *Guinness World Records 2008*. Additionally, the cluster includes a number of files related to the militant website Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad, which correlates with one of the keywords characterising this cluster ('التوحيد' – Al-Tawheed). This includes files containing articles from Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad, such as file 18448, which appears to be by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, file 18557, which is an article by Samir bin Khalil al Maliki titled 'Disassociation with the people of desires', and file 18727 by Abdul Ilah Haydar Sha'I titled 'The foot of the Americans on the brothers' necks and the knife of Zarqawi on the Americans' necks.'

Overall, while **this cluster contains documents that might be of interest to the subject matter of the study due to the focus on the website Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad, it does not appear that it would provide novel insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research**, given that the content of the cluster appears to mainly be material that has been produced for wider circulation, and therefore might not contain novel content.

## Cluster 20

Table 10.17 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 20th cluster generated under the analysis.

<sup>430</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); على – on/to; من – from; في – in; التوحيد – monotheism.



Table 10.17 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                            |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #20                                        |
| Keywords                 | وسلم / صلى / من / في / الله <sup>431</sup> |
| Stance                   | CommonAuthorities/ReportingStates          |
| Total files in cluster   | 253                                        |

This cluster also appears to comprise a range of materials and files originating from the website Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad. For example, the cluster includes an article from Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad by Muhammad Mahmood Qadi about the beginning of the revelation of the prophet Muhammad (file 18448), and another article from Minbar Tawheed wal Jihad by Ahmed Hasan Araabi about the young people around the Prophet Muhammad (file 11209).

Overall, and as with the cluster above, while **this cluster contains items that might be of interest to the subject matter of the study due to their focus, it does not appear that they would provide novel insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research**, given that the content of the cluster appears to mainly be material that has been produced for wider circulation, and therefore might not contain novel content.

#### 10.2.2. Converted Microsoft Office files, transcribed audio and video files, and the Bin Laden journal

Second, the study team conducted an analysis and characterisation of remaining files included in the 'Converted Microsoft Office files' segment of the text cluster alongside documents comprising the audio, video, and journal transcripts generated during previous Phase II activities. This included a total of 23,125 files. All files were allocated a numeric ID to facilitate the analysis (the original file names can be found in an Annex provided to WODC). As discussed in Section 6.1, a number of different analyses were run using different parameters, but it was found the parameters included in Table 10.18 returned the clearest results. The results of the clustering on these sets of files produced a total of 20 clusters. The most significant clusters are discussed in the sections below.

<sup>431</sup> Translation: الله – Allah (God); من – from; في – in; صلى – pray; وسلم – and peace.

Table 10.18 Analysis parameters employed for Text and Converted Microsoft Office files analysis

| Analysis parameters overview |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Frequency                    | 60 |
| SVD                          | 20 |
| TFIDF                        | 1  |
| Stance                       | 0  |

## Cluster 21

Table 10.19 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.19 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                                              |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #21                                                          |
| Keywords                 | عليه الله / وسلم عليه / الله صلى / وسلم / صلى <sup>432</sup> |
| Stance                   | CommonAuthorities/ ReportingStates                           |
| Total files in cluster   | 1,235                                                        |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of religious texts and documents. Most of the documents appear to be of a pedagogical nature or to be aimed at educating their intended target audience and receivers. A number of texts appear to discuss differences between Shia and Sunni Islam, as well as to encourage individuals towards leading a pious life.

The cluster is comprised of a mix of public sources and documents whose origin cannot be clearly ascertained. In one instance, an Al Qa'ida branded document discussing security issues pertaining to the organisation and its structure in Afghanistan and Pakistan was identified in the cluster (file 37259). This pamphlet also discusses the security of the leadership and cadres, the security of camp sites and training areas, and the security of individuals in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The document is couched in religious language and rhetoric, which might explain its inclusion in this cluster.

Other files included within this cluster include a religious sermon emphasising the importance of religion in life, taken from a course syllabus (file 36986); an article from the magazine 'Al Bayan', an Emirati publication, discussing differences between Sunni and Shia Islam, highlighting contradictions and issues with Shia Islam as perceived from a Sunni standpoint (file 27534); a short document discussing the importance of Islamic councils and how these are rooted in prophetic teachings as an important instrument to organise society (file 24401); and a document containing a brief overview of characteristics of the Sunni

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<sup>432</sup> Translation: الله عليه – God bless him; وسلم عليه – peace be upon him; الله صلى – God prayed; وسلم – peace; صلى – pray.

faith, focusing on the role and importance of Qur'an and prophetic ahadith (file 26500). This document appears to be a summary of views and work from Ibn Qudamah, a Sunni Muslim jurisconsult and traditionalist theologian.

Other religious material includes two sermons – files 37386 and 22505 – the latter encouraging religious faith, addressed to all Muslims and authored by Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah ibn Baz, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia between 1993 and 1999. A final example is file 24315, which is a religious book for imams discussing approaches for reading, discussing, referencing and employing the Qur'an in their work.

Overall, this cluster appears to include a range of religious material, with the majority of the files highlighted containing religious material in-line with standard orthodox teachings. However, the presence of an Al Qa'ida branded file discussing organisational matters (file 37259) suggests that additional similar source material might be included in this cluster and that additional focus on this could facilitate the identification of relevant source material. As such, **this cluster might contain potential material of interest that could help generate novel insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research, and would merit in-depth investigation.**

## Cluster 22

Table 10.20 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 22<sup>nd</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.20 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #22                       |
| Keywords                 | FI/ .. /... /... .. /.... |
| Stance                   | LangRef/AbstractConcepts  |
| Total files in cluster   | 1,029                     |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of corrupt and unreadable files. For example, files 37004, 37047 and 37279 are all corrupt and unreadable files with ASCII characters. This is corroborated by the keywords extracted, which indicate a high number of zeros within the documents. Overall, due to the nature of the files, this cluster does not have significant potential and does not appear to merit further in-depth investigation.

## Cluster 23

Table 10.21 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 23<sup>rd</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.21 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                                                 |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #23                                                             |
| Keywords                 | المسلمين / مجلة / الإسلام / الإسلامي / الإسلامية <sup>433</sup> |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts                                |
| Total files in cluster   | 1,235                                                           |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of magazine and scientific articles, as well as of monographs on a wide range of topics and themes, but generally with a religious reference or angle. This is apparent from the keywords highlighted for this cluster, which comprise of words such as ‘Muslims’, ‘Islam’, ‘Islamic’.

Examples of religiously oriented files included in this cluster includes file 37029, which discusses the significance and importance of Friday sermons; file 37119, which is a book (not dated) titled *Destroy The Democracy Idol* authored by Soliman al Kharashi, a Saudi salafi scholar; and file 27845, an article discussing the position of the Muslim Brotherhood vis-à-vis the concept of Jihad over the years.

Other files found within this cluster with a less apparent religious theme includes file 24371, which is a quasi-scientific publication discussing human morphology, with a blend of religious and peer-reviewed scientific references and sources; file 24162, another scientific publication discussing literature on the role and importance of reading for children; and file 41612, which is a book discussing the issue of racial intolerance and discrimination.

Overall, this cluster appears to offer limited potential given that sources identified appear to be from academic, scientific, or quasi scientific – and therefore publicly available – publications. Additionally, while the content appears to be religious in nature, it does not appear that this cluster would provide novel insights through further research, given the focus on traditional religious content, as opposed to content that provides additional insights into Al Qa’ida’s ideology, or previously private content.

## Cluster 24

Table 10.22 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 24<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

<sup>433</sup> Translation: المسلمين – Muslims; مجلة – magazine; الإسلام – Islam; الإسلامي – Islamic; الإسلامية – Islamic.

Table 10.22 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                      |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #24                                  |
| Keywords                 | 434 وقال / أبي / حديث / الحديث / ابن |
| Stance                   | AbstractConcepts/PersonProperty      |
| Total files in cluster   | 957                                  |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of religious texts. Unlike cluster #14 discussed above, this cluster appears to mostly comprise theological texts for a well-educated reader, rather than pedagogical texts. This includes, for example, a religious text entitled ‘Defending the view of Abu Bakr and the reasoning to prevent the guardianship of women over men’ (file 37011); an educational book discussing Islamic jurisprudence (file 37036); a book discussing prayers and how to perform them (file 36367); a religious article discussing singing and its permissibility (file 24694); and a religious book discussing the virtues of ‘the people of the house’ (i.e. the family of the Prophet Muhammad) among Sunni Muslims (file 23070).

Overall, similarly to previous clusters, it does not appear that this cluster would provide novel insights through further research, given that the content of the cluster appears to mainly be focused on traditional religious content, as opposed to content that provides additional insights in Al Qa’ida’s ideology, or previously private content.

## Cluster 25

Table 10.23 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 25<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.23 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                                     |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #25                                                 |
| Keywords                 | 435 الإسلام / الأمة / المسلمين / المجاهدين / الجهاد |
| Stance                   | CommonAuthorities/AbstractConcepts                  |
| Total files in cluster   | 817                                                 |

This cluster appears to primarily contain documents discussing issues related to Jihad, revolutions, Muslims and the activities of jihadists. This correlates with the keywords that are associated with the cluster, which include terms such as ‘jihad’, ‘mujahideen’ and ‘Islam’. A number of documents appear to have been drafted

<sup>434</sup> Translation: وقال – and he said; أبي – my father; حديث – Hadith; الحديث – the talk; ابن – the son of.

<sup>435</sup> Translation: الإسلام – Islam; الأمة – nation; المسلمين – Muslims; المجاهدين – mujahideen; الجهاد – jihad.

directly by occupants of the compound, and possibly by Bin Laden himself. This includes, for example, file 37463, which is a document that appears to include a speech from Bin Laden or another jihadist addressed to the people of Iraq, praising their ‘blessed efforts in Jihad’. This document appears to be written in a standard editable Word document, as opposed to being a copy of the speech downloaded from media sources. Another such file is file 22444, which contains notes on headlines to be covered during what appears to be a speech on ongoing revolutions in the Arab world. The document indicates what messages to try and convey (e.g. lift the spirit of the Ummah) and then what geographic areas and events to discuss (e.g. Libya, Yemen, Jordan) and what to caution youth and revolutionaries against. This particular document ties back to the content found in the broader Bin Laden journal (see Chapter 7), where Bin Laden discusses the production of a statement at length with themes that echo those included in this file.

Another interesting document that was clearly meant to be private is file 37490, which contains a letter addressed to ‘my dear sister’ and provides updates on previously discussed matters concerning security issues, a possible meeting, and the writer’s life. The letter was likely written by one of the compound inhabitants or by another individual living in hiding, as it concludes with a plea for the reader to ‘please destroy this letter after reading it’.

Other files found within this cluster include file 37485, which appears to be a Word document written by an unidentified author reflecting on geopolitical and international affairs and issues pertaining to the United States, the Gulf, and the desire of Western countries to conduct an economic war and to leverage Gulf countries to advance their interests. Given the lack of any marker suggesting this emerged from an external publication, it is plausible this might have been drafted by one of the occupants of the compound.

Finally, other examples include file 25384, which contains a fatwa on the permissibility of jihad in the Philippines from Hamoud al-Aqla al-Shuebi – an influential Saudi cleric and scholar who supported the views and actions of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qa’ida – and file 42428, which is a copy of a periodic publication called *The Voice Of Jihad*. This particular issue appears to be from the month of Ramadan in 2003 and discusses issues of jihad for those living in the Arab Peninsula.

Overall, the **files included in this cluster appear to bear a close relevance to the subject matter of the study and to include a number of primary sources and confidential documents likely authored or destined to occupants of the Abbottabad compound.** This cluster appears therefore to carry **a significant potential for new data and insights on Al Qa’ida, its structure, ideology, organisation and relation to the broader phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism to be generated through further research** and should warrant further in-depth analysis.

## Cluster 26

Table 10.24 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 26<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.24 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #26                      |
| Keywords                 | .. /... .. /... /....    |
| Stance                   | Numbers/AbstractConcepts |
| Total files in cluster   | 755                      |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of corrupt and unreadable files. For example, files 36949, 37096 and 37237 are all corrupt and unreadable files with ASCII characters. This is corroborated by the keywords extracted, which indicate a high number of zeros within the documents. Overall, due to the nature of the files, this cluster does not have significant potential and does not merit further in-depth investigation through further research.

## Cluster 26

Table 10.25 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 27<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

Table 10.25 Overview of cluster data

| Cluster content overview |                                                             |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cluster                  | #27                                                         |
| Keywords                 | أمريكا/ الولايات/ العراق/ المتحدة/ الأمريكية <sup>436</sup> |
| Stance                   | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts                            |
| Total files in cluster   | 695                                                         |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of media and other news articles, including a number of articles retrieved online. The documents included as part of this cluster appear to be focusing in particular on news pertaining to military events, international affairs, and developments occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan. The keywords generated through this cluster further emphasise the focus of these documents, with terms such as ‘America’, ‘states’, ‘united’, and ‘Iraq’ highlighted by the software analysis. While most of these documents appear to originate from public media sources, some of the documents reviewed suggest that some files might actually represent bespoke news digests prepared in-house, as well as updates and notes on developments based on outside reporting.

Examples of files included in this cluster include a variety of articles on Iraq, including file 37160 which features an article discussing ‘The Future Of Iraq – An Invitation To Think’ following the departure of US

<sup>436</sup> Translation: أمريكا – America; الولايات – states; العراق – Iraq; المتحدة – united; الأمريكية – American.

forces. The perspective put forward and the language employed by the author suggest that he is a jihadist discussing different options as to how the future of the ‘land known as Iraq’ might evolve. File 37527 is a document presenting an overview of news and developments concerning Iraq between 20 and 26 May 2006. The document appears not to be professionally made but assembled to enable the reader to familiarise themselves and access relevant news from Iraq for the week covered, acting as a sort of news digest.

Other files include a short pamphlet discussing US Administration plans to target Osama Bin Laden throughout the 1990s, however, the document is only partially legible (file 37176); an article written by Muhammad Surur bin Nayif Zayn al-‘Abidin, a Syrian salafi scholar, discussing Hezbollah and its ‘victory’ in Lebanon against the Israeli occupation, its organisational approach and ethos (file 24147); an article dating from 2010 discussing Al Qa’ida and CIA activities written by a journalist or researcher (file 27099); a newspaper article from 2004 discussing Jordanian politics (file 27480); an article discussing territorial disputes between Algeria and Morocco, which appears to originate from an online news outlet (file 24884); and a short document, with no identifiable traits, providing a brief update on military events that have occurred in Afghanistan and in Pakistan’s tribal region in the previous hours (file 22492).

Overall, this cluster contains interesting material in terms of providing a ‘snapshot’ of the situation at certain points in time over the last decade or longer. What is nonetheless interesting to note here is that this cluster contained an article on Hezbollah – a militant Shia group – which might suggest that occupants within the compound were perhaps more mentally flexible about learning and adapting from other groups, and being pragmatic about it, than was displayed publicly. However, the journalistic nature of the material – and therefore the likelihood that it was meant for wider distribution and consumption – and the fact that the content is no longer current suggest that it is likely that the documents in this cluster would have low potential in helping generate relevant new insights on Al Qa’ida’s ideology, organisation and strategy through further research.

## Cluster 28

Table 10.26 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 28<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.26 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview      |                                                    |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cluster</b>                | #28                                                |
| <b>Keywords</b>               | <sup>437</sup> Http/ الرحمن/ Http www/ الرحيم/ بسم |
| <b>Stance</b>                 | StandardsPos/CommonAuthorities                     |
| <b>Total files in cluster</b> | 693                                                |

<sup>437</sup> Translation: الرحمن – merciful; بسم – in the name of; الرحيم – compassionate/merciful (part of the bismilla, i.e. ‘In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful’).



This cluster appears to be comprised of either corrupt or English language documents. Some of these are documents with a religious – but not necessarily extremist – angle, as evidenced by some of the keywords, which contain terms used in the opening phrase of the Qur'an. Files in the cluster include files such as file 27685, which is the Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia entry for Thomas Edward Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia; file 27410, which features a Microsoft PowerPoint document presenting, in a heavily rhetorical manner, pictures of dead infants and children from conflict zones in the Greater Middle East and encouraging the viewer to do anything to support and help children in these regions. The presentation does not appear to be content stemming from a terrorist or jihadist organisation; and finally file 26398, which contains an English language publication entitled *Christianity – The Original And Present Reality*, and published by the Darussalam Publishers and Distribution in Saudi Arabia. Other documents are unreadable, such as files 27608 and 19938, which, as with previous clusters, contain unreadable files with ASCII characters.

Overall, this cluster appears to possess limited relevance for potential further research as it contains either unreadable and corrupt files, or files in English language that bear limited relevance to the subject matter of focus of this and possible future studies on Al Qa'ida.

## Cluster 29

Table 10.27 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 29<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.27 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview      |                                                        |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cluster</b>                | #29                                                    |
| <b>Keywords</b>               | منبر / التوحيد / والجهاد / Wwww/ <sup>438</sup> الجهاد |
| <b>Stance</b>                 | CommonAuthorities/AbstractConcepts                     |
| <b>Total files in cluster</b> | 675                                                    |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of pro-jihadist content, as suggested by keywords, which include terms such as 'jihad'. Other keywords include terms such as 'minbar' (platform or pulpit) and 'tawheed' (monotheism), and this is in-line with the fact that most of the documents in this cluster appear to originate from the website Minbar Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad (the Pulpit of Monotheism and Jihad), whose material was found in clusters #19 and #20 discussed above. Minbar Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad was an online platform that played a significant role in the 2000s in distributing Salafi-jihadists material widely online. The website was then run by Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi.

Examples of files included within this cluster include file 37255, which is a publication edited by Minbar Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad, titled *The Focal Point Of The Martyr – Between The Martyr Said Qutb And The Virtue Of Osama Bin Laden*. File 27687, a religious publication also from Minbar Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad; and files

<sup>438</sup> Translation: الجهاد – jihad; منبر – platform or pulpit; التوحيد – monotheism; والجهاد – jihad.

28196, 28527 and 28555, which are all publications edited by the Minbar Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad website, on topics such as Islamist movements in Iraq before and after the US occupation (file 28196) and the history of the organisation Jamahat ul Jihad (file 28555).

Although highly relevant to the subject matter of focus in the study, overall, this cluster appears to provide limited potential to generate novel insight through further research, as the website and its intellectual leader are well known in the scholarly world and jihadi world, and the material was available on a public platform.

### Cluster 30

Table 10.28 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the 30<sup>th</sup> cluster generated under the analysis.

**Table 10.28 Overview of cluster data**

| Cluster content overview      |                                                      |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cluster</b>                | #30                                                  |
| <b>Keywords</b>               | المسلمين / الشيخ / الجهاد / المجاهدين <sup>439</sup> |
| <b>Stance</b>                 | ReportingStates/AbstractConcepts                     |
| <b>Total files in cluster</b> | 610                                                  |

This cluster appears to be primarily comprised of letters and other personal and private documents with a particular focus on jihadist issues, and touching upon Al Qa'ida and its affiliate groups, including a focus on organisational and strategic matters.

Files within this cluster include a letter from 2010 written by Haji Othman that appears to be addressed to Maulvi Nazir, a prominent jihadist from Waziristan. The writer acknowledges challenges in opening documents received from Nazir. The letter also discusses organisational issues, mentioning the transit through Iran of some affiliates, and the need to replace comrades who had died on different committees (file 37471). Another document, file 37667, provides an outline of 'a simple appraisal of our situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan'. This document provides an overview of the achievements and functioning of 'the organisation', presumably Al Qa'ida, and of how it functions and interacts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The document laments the negative impact that drone strikes and spy planes have had on mujahideen in these regions.

Further examples include two files that are letters addressed to a 'sheikh Muhammad' (likely Atiyah Abd al Rahman). The first letter (file 37817) details and discusses a number of organisation issues, providing for example suggestions on communications efforts to be made, and what role Shura council should hold. In the second letter (file 37887), the author, who is not known but might possibly be Bin Laden, discusses the merits and needs of potentially changing the name of the Al Qa'ida organisation, as well as issues connected

<sup>439</sup> Translation: المسلمين – Muslims; الشيخ – the sheikh; الجهاد – jihad; المجاهدين – mujahideen.

to declaring an emirate in Somalia. Again, the contents of this letter mirror some of the content found within the Bin Laden journal (which is discussed in greater detail in Section 11.2 of this report).

Overall, the **files included in this cluster appear to bear a close relevance to the subject matter of the study and to include a number of primary sources and confidential documents authored or destined to occupants of the Abbottabad compound.** This cluster appears therefore to carry **a significant potential for new data and insights on Al Qa’ida, its structure, ideology, organisation and relation to the broader phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism to be generated through further research** and should warrant further in-depth analysis.

### 10.3. Summary and conclusions

An overview of the clusters included in this analysis is provided in Table 10.29.

**Table 10.29 Overview of the text clusters**

| Cluster number | Cluster content summary                                                                                                                                                         | Assessment          |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1              | Content has been removed from files due to malware found by the CIA, or files were corrupted or converted to a PDF.                                                             | No relevance        |
| 2              | Content from Arabic newspapers.                                                                                                                                                 | No relevance        |
| 4              | Content from Arabic newspapers.                                                                                                                                                 | No relevance        |
| 5              | Extracts from the Qur’an.                                                                                                                                                       | No relevance        |
| 8              | Religiously oriented material, including both material with a terrorist or jihadi angle and material in-line with standard orthodox teachings, but produced by militant groups. | Medium relevance    |
| 9              | Redacted documents and documents with an ideological or pro-jihadist bend.                                                                                                      | Potential relevance |
| 11             | Content from Arabic newspapers.                                                                                                                                                 | No relevance        |
| 12             | Documents of varying relevance, largely linked to Egypt and Egyptian authors.                                                                                                   | Medium relevance    |
| 13             | Content from Arabic newspapers, as well as ideological and extremist material, and documents pertaining to orthodox religious teachings.                                        | Potential relevance |
| 14             | Documents covering a range of religious topics.                                                                                                                                 | Potential relevance |
| 15             | Documents covering a range of religious topics.                                                                                                                                 | Limited relevance   |
| 16             | Documents covering a range of religious topics.                                                                                                                                 | Limited relevance   |
| 19             | Documents covering a range of religious topics including content originating from a militant website.                                                                           | Limited relevance   |
| 20             | Content originating from a militant website.                                                                                                                                    | Limited relevance   |
| 21             | Religiously oriented material and Al Qa’ida-focused documentation.                                                                                                              | Medium relevance    |

| Cluster number | Cluster content summary                                                                                                                            | Assessment        |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 22             | Corrupt and unreadable files.                                                                                                                      | No relevance      |
| 23             | Magazines, scientific articles, and monographs on a wide range of topics and themes, but generally with a religious reference or angle.            | Limited relevance |
| 24             | Documents covering a range of religious topics.                                                                                                    | Limited relevance |
| 25             | Documents discussing issues related to Jihad, revolutions, Muslims and the activities of jihadists.                                                | High relevance    |
| 26             | Corrupt and unreadable files.                                                                                                                      | No relevance      |
| 27             | Media and other news articles.                                                                                                                     | Limited relevance |
| 28             | Corrupt and English language documents.                                                                                                            | No relevance      |
| 29             | Documents with pro-jihadist content including content originating from a militant website.                                                         | Limited relevance |
| 30             | Letters and other personal and private documents with a particular focus on jihadist issues, and touching upon Al Qa'ida and its affiliate groups. | High relevance    |

Conducting a clustering analysis of the files has enabled the project team to identify broad patterns within the large text cluster of the Archive. Notwithstanding the files that were edited by the CIA (primarily included in the first and third clusters discussed above) and the corrupt and unreadable ones, the files included in the Archive can be broadly divided into three categories.

The first category pertains to media and newspaper articles. This includes for example clusters where copies of Al Quds Al Araby feature heavily. This category also contains clusters comprising of news digests and other media content.

The second category pertains to documents with religious content presenting often orthodox teachings, if not Salafi views. Clusters with such documents present copies of the Qur'an, as well as publications on various religious topics, commentaries on the Qur'an (tafsir), sermons and so on. This type of content is also in-line with what was observed in other sections of the Archive, such as the videos, which included content on a variety of religious topics.

The third category of text clusters features texts promoting views and ideas aligned with Al Qa'ida's own ideology, when they do not discuss Al Qa'ida and its strategy, organisation and role in the Jihadist world more broadly. The documents included in these clusters are more varied than those found within the other categories and include material that appears to have been written by or for Bin Laden and other senior leaders and cadres from the organisation in contact with those located in the Abbottabad compound. Clusters include documents and files of a personal or private nature; extremist material and material upholding militant jihadist ideology; and documents by jihadist groups and/or scholars known for their pro-jihadist background.

This final category is the closest one to the interests and subject matter of this study, and the presence of documents of a private and personal nature – as opposed to more public material – makes it a significant

candidate for possible further research work and for broader research and analysis. Clusters that primarily contain material falling within this category of interest include clusters #8, #9, #12, #13, #14, #21, #25 and #30. However, it should be noted that documents in this group also include a mix of public and non-public material, and some documents within these clusters have been redacted or corrupted to some extent, which means that the entire document is not available. While these clusters appear to contain the most meaningful documents from a study perspective, a further staged approach to their analysis could be considered with a view to prioritising clusters #8, #12, #21, #25 and #30, with clusters #9, #13 and #14 being considered as second priority for further in-depth analysis.

## 11. Bin Laden journal analysis

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This chapter provides an overview of the analysis conducted on the so-called Bin Laden Journal. While the journal was included within the wider text analysis, a separate, qualitative assessment was also undertaken. The chapter opens with an overview of the journal content and themes (Section 11.1), before discussing insights and findings stemming from their analysis (Section 11.2).

### 11.1. Journal overview

The so-called ‘Bin Laden journal’ included in the Archive opens by stating that it will contain Bin Laden’s notes on ‘revolutions in the Arab world’. However, the journal appears to have been written by people other than Bin Laden, transcribing his words and thoughts. There might be more than one transcriber, as Bin Laden is sometimes referred to as ‘the father’, and at other times ‘her father’ or ‘Abu Abdullah’. Parts of the journal appear to record conversations and questions between members of the compound. The majority of questions appear to be asked by Summaya (a daughter of Bin Laden), then Khalid (a son of Bin Laden), and lastly Maryam (a daughter of Bin Laden). Umm Hamza (presumably one of Bin Laden’s wives) is also named as asking questions.

The first entry is made in February 2011, while the last entry is from 1 May 2011. The majority of the journal discusses events and protests in countries of the Arab world, providing updates and documenting what is happening and how the situation is evolving. When discussing the country situations, Bin Laden mainly recounts what is happening and his wish for the revolutions to succeed. The journal references the news broadcaster Al Jazeera frequently, as well as what various political analysts are saying about the situation. It is clearly meant as a personal document only, as opposed to a wider organisational planning document. For example, certain entries contain short poems.

While at the start of the journal a positive outlook about the success of the revolutions transpires from the journal, this feeling changes as the weeks and months go by. Notes in the diary start to suggest that the revolutions might have happened too fast and too early, and that people were not sufficiently prepared to see them through. While the journal author, presumably Bin Laden, mentions that Al Qa’ida has not looked to interfere with the revolutions, it is mentioned that Bin Laden supported the revolutions because he saw them as the doorway through which Al Qa’ida and Islamist movements could set up an Islamic governance system. On a number of occasions, Bin Laden indicates his preference for avoiding violence and preferring peaceful methods to enable change. This view is at odds with wider actions taken by the Al Qa’ida group more generally.

### 11.1.1. Broader narrative on Al Qa'ida during the Arab Spring period

#### Box 11.1 Brief summary of the main events relating to the start of the Arab Spring (2010–2011)

- **December 2010:** Mohamed Bouazizi sets himself on fire in Tunisia. This event marks the start of the Arab Spring and the start of protests in Tunisia against the government.
- **January 2011:** Protests start occurring in Algeria against government corruption, amongst other grievances. Protests also start in Egypt, Syria and Yemen, over similar issues including police brutality, corruption and unemployment.
- **February 2011:** Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigns. Peaceful protests start in Bahrain, and anti-government protests start in Libya, although the latter turn violent as clashes between protestors and government forces develop.
- **March 2011:** Start of the Syrian revolution. Clashes soon intensify between the protestors and government forces, leading to the start of a civil war.
- **June 2011:** Protests intensify and become violent in Yemen, culminating in the bombing of the President's palace.
- **August 2011:** Trial of former Egyptian President Mubarak starts; Libyan rebels take the city of Tripoli.
- **October 2011:** Libya's Colonel Gaddafi is killed by rebels.
- **November–December 2011:** Peaceful protests continue in Egypt.

Source: PEN/OPP (2014); The Telegraph (2011).

Overall, the public narrative around Al Qa'ida during the Arab Spring period when Bin Laden was still alive (December 2010–May 2011) suggested that the events of the Arab Spring went against Al Qa'ida's rhetoric and ideology. Some Western analysts went so far as to declare that the phenomenon of the Arab Spring had rung the death knell of Al Qa'ida.<sup>440</sup> This was coupled with the view that, even before the start of the Arab Spring, Al Qa'ida and its franchises had lost their dominance – and relevance – within the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. This was due to the fact that the leadership was based outside of the MENA region, the difficulty Al Qa'ida faced in gaining support – and even turning the population against them (e.g. in Iraq with Al Qa'ida in Iraq<sup>441</sup>) – and its inability to carry out high impact attacks. Overall, Al Qa'ida was seen as becoming 'irrelevant' due to its actions and structural limits.<sup>442</sup>

Regarding the view that Al Qa'ida was becoming irrelevant following the start of the Arab Spring, this assessment centres around the fact that uprisings by the people run counter to Al Qa'ida's narrative of affecting change through the strategic use of violence. In this sense, the Arab Spring was perceived as a threat to the Al Qa'ida ideology and approach,<sup>443</sup> and in particular its 'violent rhetoric'. Al Qa'ida has stated that change can only be achieved through violent action – whereas at its beginning, the Arab Spring was influencing change through non-violent means.<sup>444</sup> Indeed, the seemingly successful result of the peaceful revolutions at the start of the Arab Spring – such as the removal of Egyptian President Mubarak and

<sup>440</sup> Johnson (2011); Cruickshank (2011); Shane (2011).

<sup>441</sup> McCants (2011).

<sup>442</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).

<sup>443</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).

<sup>444</sup> Harris (2011); Lilli (2011).

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali – went counter to the aims of Al Qa’ida with regard to undertaking violent action to achieve results.<sup>445</sup>

Other factors that partially defy or counter Al Qa’ida’s ideology are requests made by the Arab Spring revolutionaries for democracy, a resolution to the unemployment crisis, and the tackling of corruption. The former point (i.e. the establishment of a democratic regime) runs counter to Al Qa’ida’s objective<sup>446</sup> of installing a ‘pan-Islamic state based on Shari’a’,<sup>447</sup> and view of democracy as ‘a form of government that negates the values of Islam.’<sup>448</sup> This is noted for example by Lilli (2011), who made the assessment that calls for democracy during the revolutions were ‘bad news for terrorists.’<sup>449</sup>

Additionally, and despite claims by certain regional leaders, and in particular Libya’s Gaddafi, that the Arab Spring was orchestrated by Al Qa’ida, Lilli (2011) cites the fact that no statements were released on the topic by Bin Laden,<sup>450</sup> and Al Qa’ida remained silent and was slow to respond to the unfolding events, as indications of the contrary. Analysts suggest that this showed that Al Qa’ida was caught off guard, and was unsure as to how to respond to the events.<sup>451</sup>

According to the narrative that circulated at the time, the other way in which Al Qa’ida’s narrative was purportedly undermined by the Arab Spring was the fact that the US and its allies had opted not to interfere in Egyptian and Tunisian matters – although these governments had been their allies<sup>452</sup> – and had actively helped remove the Libyan leader, Gaddafi, from power, despite him being perceived by that time as a Western ally.<sup>453</sup> Analysts also noted that these events proved Al Qa’ida and its approach were not needed to remove ‘corrupt Muslim regimes’ from power.<sup>454</sup>

However, as time went by and the protests – and government responses – turned violent, some analysts started indicating that the Arab Spring could be an opportunity for Al Qa’ida. The Arab Spring could help enable Al Qa’ida restore its relevance among its target population (Sunni Muslims). In particular, Zarate and Gordon (2011) were of the opinion that, overall, ‘if the Arab Spring leads to disillusionment, it could re-energise al-Qaeda’,<sup>455</sup> particularly if the demonstrations led to ‘division, discontent, and conflict’, further bolstering claims by Al Zawahiri that fighting is the only way to achieve reform.<sup>456</sup>

Following the death of Bin Laden, and as the revolutions developed further, this opinion started to be voiced by other researchers. For example, Kelsay (2011) noted that in countries where the revolutions were

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<sup>445</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011); Braniff & Moghadam (2011).

<sup>446</sup> McCants (2011); Harris (2011); Lilli (2011).

<sup>447</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).

<sup>448</sup> Schweitzer & Stern (2011).

<sup>449</sup> Lilli (2011).

<sup>450</sup> Lilli (2011). However, a statement was released by the then-Deputy of Al Qa’ida, Ayman Al Zawahiri, albeit weeks after the protests started. Source: Holbrook (2012).

<sup>451</sup> Gerges (2011); Schweitzer & Stern (2011); Holbrook (2012).

<sup>452</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).

<sup>453</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).

<sup>454</sup> Gunaratna (2011).

<sup>455</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).

<sup>456</sup> Zarate & Gordon (2011).



not bringing about positive change, but rather spiralling downwards, such as Yemen and Syria, the ‘real winners are likely to be groups affiliated with or fashioned on the model of al Qa’ida’<sup>457</sup>, where such groups can reap the benefits of poor governance and chaos. Towards the end of 2011, analysts began to note that growing chaos and continued feelings among the people of disenfranchisement despite the revolutions could be of benefit to Al Qa’ida, such as finding new recruits, and carving out a role for themselves in the region and amidst the changes occurring there.<sup>458</sup>

## 11.2. Journal themes and insights

A number of themes and insights emerge from the journal analysis. The primary insight is **the close attention paid by Bin Laden on the developments of the Arab Spring**. While Al Qa’ida was largely silent during the first phase of the Arab Spring, the journal shows that Bin Laden was following the news on this topic quite closely, and that he saw this period of uprising as a positive development.

The fall of all the regimes is in the interest of the Muslim ummah [‘community of the faithful’]. *[p.46]*

Particularly in the first half of the journal, the entries are very focused on detailing the latest developments – with an overview of the situation across all countries of the region, and a particular focus on Libya and Gaddafi. However, the developing situations in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen are also mentioned. Bin Laden also refers to Saudi Arabia, and the region of Hijaz (a region within Saudi Arabia) frequently, discussing how Saudi power structures are reacting to events, such as whether the country might fall prey to the uprising taking place in the other countries in the region, and its ongoing proxy war with Iran and tensions between the two countries.

Overall, the journal shows that Bin Laden and Al Qa’ida more generally were taking stock of the events as they unfolded, and monitoring the situation. However, in some places, Bin Laden indicates a wish for more direct action:

With regards to Yemen it requires careful thought. There is an opportunity to assassinate the President. Al Qa’ida should undertake this even if one of the protestors was to do it, it would be fine. *[p.13]*

This aligns with the fact that Bin Laden notes the opportunities provided by the uprisings and outlines a broad vision of how he sees the situation benefiting Al Qa’ida:

The difference between Egypt and Tunisia on the one hand and Libya on the other is that the Libyan revolution has opened the doors for jihadists, whereas the former might require years. That is why Gaddafi and his son say that the extremists will come and that the Mediterranean will be the domain of Al Qa’ida. *[p.13]*

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<sup>457</sup> Kelsay (2011).

<sup>458</sup> Hoffman (2012); Holbrook (2012).

The turmoil is continuing which makes it a suitable environment to spread the ideology of Al Qa'ida and Islam, whilst they are unable to put an end to the state of affairs. [p.15]

Gaddafi feels the doors are closing in on him, with his statement that if we bring Al Qa'ida out a Jihad will begin from the Mediterranean. This is the future, God willing. [p. 29]

We believe that the revolution will be to the benefit of the Islamists, by patience, wisdom and propagation. [p.59]

Praise to God, these revolutions are an abundant blessing for the Muslim nation generally and for the Mujahideen in particular. There is much goodness in these revolutions for the Muslim Ummah even if some of them have happened without the adequate preparation. [p.87]

Bin Laden also appears to provide words of advice for the people undertaking the revolutions – however, it is not clear how public he expected these statements to be. Overall, he recommends having patience ('It is a gradual process, this is the message I wish to send to the Saudi people especially the youth', p.21).

The journal also shows that Bin Laden was **actively thinking about 'public relations' activities and creating content for wider release**. This includes a poem ('A revolutionary poem for people of the Arabian peninsula'), and discussion around making and releasing content around the events of the Arab Spring, as exemplified below:

I am thinking of making my appearance at this stage especially as our presence as Al Qa'ida in Yemen is well known. [p.41]

We don't want to militarise popular opinion against the people. Therefore, if I appear my speech will be brief and to the point. [p.43]

I think that a statement should be issued partly about Yemen to turn attention away from the fact that the brothers in Libya are rushing and this is the reality even if it isn't mentioned in the media. [p.63]

The lack of statement coming from Bin Laden with regards to the developments is also noted in the journal – on page 69, the entry notes that Summaya states that 'People are waiting for your viewpoint regarding the western intervention [in Libya].' The reason for his relative silence however might be explained by the contents of the journal. On the one hand, there is ambivalence around the release of a statement due to the rapid evolution of the events. On the other hand, the lack of statement might have been to not influence the unfolding events.

Towards the end of the journal (from mid-April onwards), Bin Laden appears more focused on releasing a statement to the wider public. The journal mentions some of its content.

Acknowledging the youth for their rising up against tyrannical rulers. A warning should also be given to the countries that have not rebelled that the youth are ready to rebel. [p.173]

A draft statement possibly indicating headlines and key messages to be covered during such a message was identified in the Archive during text analysis work (discussed in Chapter 6). Based on the diary it also appears that the statement would seek to show that the mujahideen were the originators of the revolutions. The idea of establishing a *shura* was also a central tenet of this statement, and on how to best conclude the revolutions in the Arab world. A separate statement was also being envisaged towards the end of the journal, to cover additional aspects including the US, Egypt, and Israel. However, there is little detail on what was envisaged to be discussed on these topics. It appears that the recording of the statement started from 22 April, according to that day's journal entry.

The journal also mentions some **wider ideological, strategic and organisational aspects of Al Qa'ida** at the time at which it was written, although these are not the focus, and do not provide much additional information. With regards to **organisational matters and the Arab Spring, the journal mentions bases of operation and strongholds**. One entry discusses letters received from various locations and individuals. Sheikh Mahmood (also known as Atiyah Abd al Rahman) is mentioned. A letter from Somalia is also mentioned. It is possible that this originates from Al Shabaab, as Bin Laden mentions Abu Zubayr – presumably referring to the leader of the Al Shabaab group. This letter suggests that affiliate groups did look to Bin Laden for guidance. The journal states that the letter asks for advice around the 'announcement of an emirate and the state' (p.179) and asking for military equipment.

People or groups affiliated with Al Qa'ida are also briefly mentioned – such as Al Nufaisi and Hamid Abdallah Ahmad al-Ali – as well as how messages were circulated:

After this gathering we have to think about events and the subject of a consultative council and private messages/letters to Nufaisi and others. [p.103]

However, it is not clear how much authority Bin Laden had over Al Qa'ida's affiliate groups, as exemplified by this extract:

Al Qa'ida throughout the region is silent. I believe they have the same understanding, if Algeria [Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb] were to talk they would have done it in the beginning but they have been silent. [p.103]

**Ideological matters discussed in the journal show that Bin Laden was focused on the creation of an 'ideal' Islamic society.** This is very much centred around a Sunni society (derogatory terms and negative statements towards Shia are present in the journal) with an Islamic constitution, and the need to restore and unite the *ummah* ('the community of the faithful'). The need for unity in the *ummah* is repeated at several points in the journal:

Unity will help towards achieving independence and self-sufficiency for the ummah [...] resolving the problems of the Arab world begins with Arab unity. The English said divide and conquer, we can say unite and conquer. Arab fragmentation is the shortest path to death. Unity is not a matter of emotions or a religious obligation, it is a matter of survival. [p.189]

The creation of a *shura* ('council') is of particular importance as regarded by Bin Laden:

Forming the council is important for today, tomorrow and the future. There must be a reference point for us in critical events. It is shameful not to have a council

unifying the Muslims from Indonesia to Morocco. We will give it importance [...] The presence of a council is important for the ultimate objective to create the awareness in people before, during and after the revolution so that people will carry the honour of unity and credibility with the passing of time and to serve the government [and] with the passing of time establish an Islamic State. [p.111]

Bin Laden was of the opinion that there should be a *shura* in every country, and an overarching one for the Islamic world. This *shura* would be responsible for developing solutions to the crisis situations in the Middle East – starting with Yemen and Syria. However, it is unclear to what extent this idea was taken up by the Al Qa’ida group more widely – one entry mentions that ‘they [Sheikh Muhammad and Abu Yahya]<sup>459</sup> did not really touch on the idea of the Consultative Council. As far as I am concerned it is very important’ (p.182).

**On the strategic aspect, references to 9/11 as a seminal moment** appear throughout the journal. Bin Laden discusses how 9/11 changed how the West interacted with countries and their rulers – and would explain why Western countries were not necessarily backing the rulers during the uprising. Bin Laden mentions that the ‘killing of our children’ and ‘support for the Zionist regime’ (p.148) were the reason for 9/11. In these entries, he does not appear to be a proponent of violence (‘We do not kill for the sake of killing. We defend ourselves’, p.148). Additionally, the tenth anniversary of 9/11 is also mentioned as being ‘very close’ – however, Bin Laden does not expand this point further.

The journal also shows that Bin Laden was also actively thinking about how to keep Al Qa’ida relevant. In one entry, he suggests a change in presentational strategy:

I’ve had an idea that we should give Al-Qa’ida a new image and change the general framework of the organisation and its form. If there would be a message to the brothers that starts with the verse ‘God does not change the condition of a people until they change themselves’ – we should proceed in accordance with this verse as a methodology for the life of the organisation in regards to ideology, politics and social and economic matters. [p.127]

Another apparent theme within the journal is a number of **wider policy issues** discussed by Bin Laden. This includes Gaza and Palestine; the water crisis in the Middle East; food shortages; substandard education; unemployment; the evils of capitalism; and democracy. Education in particular is a recurring policy matter in the journal – Bin Laden appears to believe that not only is a religious education of particular importance, but education more generally, as it would reduce Middle Eastern countries’ dependency on others. He also mentions that the ‘police state’ of the Arab countries are hampering people’s full use of their mental capabilities, and that the rulers in the Arab world are detrimental to their countries:

America has 10,000s of research centres. The Arab world is least equipped with research centres. Among the reasons for this is rulers who are incompetent. Some of whom are only concerned with their own personal interests. [p.123]

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<sup>459</sup> It is unclear who these individuals are. According to online sources, Sheikh Muhammad might be Atiyah Abd al-Rahman – Bin Laden’s ‘chief of staff’ – and Abu Yahya might be Abu Yahya al-Libi, another high-ranking Al Qa’ida official.

### 11.3. Summary and conclusions

Overall, the main focus of the journal is on the developing situation across Arab countries during the Arab Spring. Despite popular thinking – at the time – that Al Qa’ida was opposed to the nature in which change was occurring, the contents of the journal suggest that Bin Laden supported the spirit and some of the aims of the revolutions. It appears from this that the method in which change was achieved was not as important as presumed, compared to the change actually being achieved – or being sought.

Insights from the journal appear to show a disconnect in the thinking regarding Al Qa’ida’s strategy between Western analysis and the thoughts recorded by Bin Laden, at the time of the Arab Spring. Even post-9/11 and during the period of the Arab Spring, the prevalent perception remained that Al Qa’ida’s strategy centred around violent acts,<sup>460</sup> despite the fact that Al Qa’ida had created a sophisticated and robust media strategy, displaying early on that it was intent on ideas in winning the hearts and minds of people.<sup>461</sup>

The content of the journal also provides insights into the making of statements and speeches by the leader of Al Qa’ida. This includes the careful crafting of speeches and statements, revisions to ensure adequacy of the content, and reflections on the impact a statement by Al Qa’ida might have on the unfolding events.

While the contents of the journal are centred around the Arab Spring, it nonetheless offers glimpses into wider issues of interest to Bin Laden – such as the Palestinian question and the wider organisation of the Muslim world.

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<sup>460</sup> See for example Watts (2012) or Boeke (2016).

<sup>461</sup> Ciovacco (2009).

## 12. Conclusions

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This chapter presents a summary of the study's results from both Phase I and II. It opens with an overview of findings pertaining to the research questions addressed under Phase I (Section 12.1), before providing an overview of findings pertaining to the research questions under Phase II (Section 12.2). The chapter then concludes with reflections and recommendations for possible further research (Section 12.3).

### 12.1. Phase I research questions

This section provides a brief overview of findings and results concerning research questions relevant to Phase I of the study.

#### 1a) What is the state-of-the-art understanding – as discerned from academic and grey literature – of... Al Qa'ida's ideology and motives

Literature reviewed under Phase I indicates that Al Qa'ida's ideology is based on Salafism, a strict interpretation of Islam, which aims to return to the traditions of the so-called 'pious predecessors' (*al-Salaf al-Salih*). Al Qa'ida's ideology focuses on the concept of global *Jihad* and is characterised by a strong anti-US and anti-Western sentiment. The key ideological elements and principles undergirding Al Qa'ida have reportedly remained stable throughout the years. However, a number of nuances and conflicting views can be observed within the Salafi *Jihadist* movement itself, and within the organisation, resulting in practical implications for how Al Qa'ida has structured itself throughout the years as an organisation, and how it has operated in different contexts and areas of operations.

In addition to elements of Salafi thought, Al Qa'ida's ideology draws upon selected parts of Islamic scholarship and tradition to build narratives and rhetoric that reach into long-standing and deeply held views and grievances among Muslim communities. Furthermore, the group is seen as building on the teachings of several scholars whose works and writings are used to provide legitimacy in the eyes of potential supporters and recruits.

Finally, scholars focusing on Al Qa'ida and other *Jihadist* groups also emphasise the importance of not overstating Al Qa'ida's ideological basis and coherence, given the tendency of Al Qa'ida and other *Jihadist* groups to adjust theological and ideological arguments (i) to fit operational realities and needs, rather than the other way around; and (ii) in light of changing context, needs and surviving members and scholars who remain active in the organisation.

1b) What is the state-of-the-art understanding – as discerned from academic and grey literature – of... Al Qa'ida's organisation, including its relations with external branches and affiliated groups

Within the literature, there appears to be a general consensus that Al Qa'ida's organisation has evolved significantly since the early 2000s, moving from being a single, centralised entity to a more decentralised, networked and global movement. In particular, literature reviewed suggests a strong consensus for conceptualising Al Qa'ida's organisational structure as comprising a central core and a global network of affiliate groups connected to the core by different relations and arrangements.

In this regard, a number of debates can be identified within the literature regarding, for example, the level of control that Al Qa'ida Central exerts over its affiliates, and the extent to which the formal command and control structures linking Al Qa'ida Central and its affiliates have remained effective following the death of Osama Bin Laden.

The existing literature captures the development and transformation of Al Qa'ida's organisation; while discrepancies exist in some places, there is wide consensus on the organisation's historical trajectory. While many sources view this transformation to have been borne out of necessity (due to losses incurred and in response to a changing strategic environment), others view it as part of a deliberate, long-term strategy for ensuring the organisation's global reach.

1c) What is the state-of-the-art understanding – as discerned from academic and grey literature – of... Al Qa'ida's strategy, tactics and modus operandi including political, military and propaganda activities

Within the literature, scholars and experts have formulated different approaches to analysing and conceptualising Al Qa'ida's strategy. Overall, a consensus emerges in the literature around some overarching goals and objectives, including: awakening consciences and inspiring Muslims across the world to join *Jihad*; targeting apostate regimes across the Muslim world to bring about their downfall; confronting Western countries and their allies to weaken their standing and solidity; and re-establishing a global Caliphate and achieving final victory. Most notably, however, neither documents retrieved from Al Qa'ida nor data available in the public domain provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which different strategic objectives and goals are prioritised and pursued by the group.

Available literature on Al Qa'ida's strategy also reveals a tension within the group's approach to prioritising targets of 'near' and 'far' enemies. Some sources provide empirical evidence suggesting that in recent years, Al Qa'ida has been mainly focused on operations against the so-called near enemy and that its strategy has shifted towards localised goals and population-centric approaches, rather than on the conduct of high-profile attacks designed to instil fear in the so-called far enemy. Other scholars also suggest that the line between these two targeting approaches has become increasingly blurred in the 21st century, as Al Qa'ida and other *Jihadist* groups have begun to attack both near and far enemies, dependent on opportunities.

In terms of other strategic enablers and aspects of Al Qa'ida's strategic and operational work:

- An examination of the existing literature reveals an understanding and consensus concerning the use and importance of training camps in the early years of Al Qa'ida. However, limited information

is available as to Al Qa'ida's current training practices and facilities outside of the context of limited case studies on affiliate groups.

- Literature reviewed indicates that propaganda has been a key tool employed by Al Qa'ida throughout its history to inspire and recruit *Jihadists* across the globe. A general consensus in the literature indicates that the use of media releases and publications has played a central role in Al Qa'ida's global strategy, supporting and enabling the dissemination of its anti-Western narrative and enabling the global recruitment of aspiring *jihadists*.
- A limited number of sources within the literature reviewed provide insights into the security measures adopted by Al Qa'ida to protect its leadership and operatives. Publications that address these topics provide considerably detailed information or analysis; however, these sources are small in number and therefore the evidence should not be taken as being fully conclusive.

#### 1d) What is the state-of-the-art understanding – as discerned from academic and grey literature – of... *Jihadi terrorism*

The history of Al Qa'ida has been closely intertwined and, at times, almost entirely overlapped with that of the revival of violent Salafi *Jihadism* and *Jihadi terrorism*, which occurred in the second half of the 20th century. Since its inception, Al Qa'ida has transformed from a small, relatively unknown and regionally focused organisation, to a global organisation with monopoly over the *Jihadist* space, to one that is faced by a competitor – the Islamic State – that has proven more effective in generating resources, recruiting and inspiring fighters and uniting affiliates through the use of technology.

Research conducted prior to the emergence of the Islamic State generally holds Al Qa'ida to have been an unrivalled dominant actor in the global *jihadi* movement. More recently, the literature reviewed over the course of Phase I indicates that the context in which Al Qa'ida as an organisation operates has changed drastically from its early years. Most notably, the organisation presently no longer appears to hold a quasi-monopoly over the *Jihadist* movement and instead must compete with rival groups, most notably the Islamic State, for influence and recruits. In connection to discussions of Al Qa'ida's global influence relative to that of the Islamic State, many sources reflect on the organisation's changing structure and relations with its affiliates, and its struggles to ensure that the wider *Jihadist* movement continues to pursue a coherent strategic direction overseen by Al Qa'ida's leadership.

Looking at the present context, the literature reveals disagreements among scholars regarding the extent and nature of Al Qa'ida's relative decline since the emergence of the Islamic State. Some hold that since its establishment, the Islamic State has made rapid progress in dismantling Al Qa'ida's leadership of the global *jihadi* movement, and has thus come to dominate the ideological and strategic space. Others suggest that Al Qa'ida's core organisation and its wider network have remained resilient, and its 'brand appeal' continues to resonate with and influence extremist groups worldwide.



2a & b) What research efforts have been conducted or are ongoing to analyse the Bin Laden Archive? To what extent have these efforts exhausted the potential for insights and findings to be generated through an analysis of the Bin Laden Archive data and files?

During Phase I the study team conducted a systematic research of publications covering the so-called Bin Laden Archive or analysing its data and documentation. Furthermore, the study team engaged with a selected number of experts and scholars to elicit their knowledge as to ongoing or completed research efforts on the Bin Laden Archive data that had not been released in the public domain.

The efforts of the study team resulted in the identification of a shortlist of 30 studies of potential relevance to the work being conducted (i.e. studies that entailed a review and analysis of at least part of the materials included in the Bin Laden Archive or in the so-called Bin Laden Bookshelf – a previous, incomplete release of the Archive). However, the majority of publications identified and reviewed made only limited or passing references to the Bin Laden Archive, acknowledging its existence but not conducting analysis of its data.

The study team identified six publications that were further investigated due to their having reviewed data included in the Archive.<sup>462</sup> In all such instances, research conducted on data included in the Bin Laden Archive and on the Bin Laden Bookshelf entailed a qualitative review of a limited sample of files and documents. Overall, the small number of articles and publications identified, and the methodological limitations of endeavours undertaken so far on the Bin Laden Archive, suggest that there is still significant scope for further research and analysis to be conducted on these data.

2c) Would it be feasible to apply the proposed Phase II research methods on data included in the Bin Laden Archive?

The conduct of a feasibility assessment for tasks envisioned under Phase II of the study did not highlight any significant concern or impediment with regard to the delivery of the tasks and approaches proposed. In agreement with the study SAC and WODC, the study team conducted a 14-step feasibility assessment process of Phase II methods. The study team was able to successfully design and test a wide array of data transfer, handling and analysis approaches cognisant of applicable legislation and Phase II research requirements.

Table 12.1 provides an overview of the feasibility assessment steps completed, alongside an indication of whether any remaining adjustment and mitigating actions should be implemented in the context of Phase II. Only a limited subset of mitigating actions and adjustments were identified for implementation in the context of Phase II of the study, particularly as regards (i) the preparation of samples for analysis and review under Phase II; and (ii) the use of RAND-Lex during Phase II activities. It was not possible to conduct a full feasibility assessment of the methods and approaches proposed for image analysis in Phase II due to resource constraints. Engagement with the selected external service provider for image analysis confirmed nonetheless the availability and suitability of the company identified for the tasks and work envisioned.

**Table 12.1 Overview and summary of Phase II feasibility assessment results**

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<sup>462</sup> Lahoud et al. (2012); Collins (2012); Roggio (2017); Gartenstein-Ross & Barr (2018); Grace (2018a; 2018b).

| Step | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                      | Status    | Phase II adjustments                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.   | Contact relevant national authorities to inform them about ongoing research on the Bin Laden Archive and request advice on data storage, handling and distribution procedures (if necessary). | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2.   | Design internal data storage, handling and transfer processes compliant with relevant national legislation.                                                                                   | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 3.   | Prepare and collect signed Bin Laden Archive access and project-participation consent forms from research team members, and commence Bin Laden Archive handling work.                         | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 4.   | Download, scan, clean and prepare a copy of the Bin Laden Archive hosted on a local machine to use for project activities.                                                                    | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 5.   | Design, prepare and test internal software and hardware system architecture for conduct of Phase II activities.                                                                               | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See Step 7</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 6.   | Prepare randomised and non-randomised data samples for different file types to be used during Phase II data manipulation activities.                                                          | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean Bin Laden Archive copy employed in the study of non-relevant and empty/corrupt files before preparation of Phase II samples.</li> <li>• Cluster audio and video files of unknown duration according to file size as proxy for expected duration to ensure inclusion in Phase II samples.</li> <li>• Replace in Phase II samples the envisioned audio and video files with duration above three hours with files of at least one hour duration.</li> <li>• Pre-screen samples generated to ensure inclusion in transcription, review and analysis activities of only files relevant to the subject matter of the study.</li> </ul> |
| 7.   | Upload full Bin Laden Archive text documents subset on RAND-Lex, and test RAND-Lex features proposed for use in Phase II text analytics work.                                                 | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-process all text files included in the Archive through an OCR software to ensure correcting processing by RAND-Lex.</li> <li>• Employ scalable hardware architecture through RAND Corporation Amazon Web Services account to ensure swift processing and analysis of Bin Laden Archive data through RAND-Lex.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 8.   | Test software for conversion into audio format of video files included in the Archive.                                                                                                        | Completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

| Step | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                    | Status              | Phase II adjustments                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9.   | Test process for transfer, processing and receipt of transcribed audio files with external service provider.                                                                                | Completed           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 10.  | Test process for transfer, processing and receipt of processed image samples with external service provider.                                                                                | Partially completed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 11.  | Test process for transfer, processing and receipt of analysis of video files with US-based researchers tasked with this activity.                                                           | Completed           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 12.  | Explore costs associated with OCR processing of printed and handwritten documents in Arabic and feasibility of including their use as part of Phase II activities.                          | Completed           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Once Phase II is confirmed, acquire selected OCR software (ReadIRIS) for the purpose of adjustments identified under Step 7 (i.e. pre-processing of all Bin Laden Archive text files to ensure adequate processing by RAND-Lex).</li> </ul> |
| 13.  | Review results of feasibility assessment work during Phase I internal validation workshop, and critically assess and revise where necessary methodology proposed for Phase II of the study. | Completed           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 14.  | Report results and recommendations stemming from feasibility assessment work in <i>Phase I Summary Report</i> for SAC and WODC.                                                             | Completed           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

## 12.2. Phase II research questions

### 3) How can data and files included in the Bin Laden Archive be characterised, categorised and clustered?

When the United States CIA disclosed files in 2017 recovered in Abbottabad (Pakistan) during the raid conducted on Osama Bin Laden's compound in 2011, the Archive content was released as a standalone, unorganised data set of files and documents, as well as in clusters built according to file types. In particular, files in the Archive include (clustered according to file type and content):

- More than 72,000 image files accounting for approximately 7GB of data;
- More than 18,000 text files accounting for approximately 16 GB of data;
- More than 24,000 Microsoft Offices files converted into PDF format, accounting for approximately 12 GB of data;
- More than 11,000 audio files accounting for approximately 30 GB of data; and
- More than 10,000 video files accounting for approximately 162 GB of data.

During Phase II of this project, the study team took file type as the characteristic around which to build macro clusters of the Archive to further investigate and characterise. For each Archive cluster<sup>463</sup> the study

<sup>463</sup> Although a separate qualitative analysis was conducting on the Bin Laden journal, the journal is not a cluster of its own and is assessed as part of the text cluster.

team designed and implemented a different research and analysis approach, being mindful of the requirement to provide as thorough a characterisation as possible within the constraints of project resources and timeframe. This led the study team to adopt a sample-based analysis approach for the image, audio and video clusters that leveraged stratified samples to ensure that different file types and sub-clusters would be considered in the work. For the text cluster, the study team adopted a machine-enabled approach to conduct a mapping and characterisation of the entirety of text files available. The results and findings of these activities are summarised in the next sections.

4a & b) To what extent can different clusters and subsets of the Bin Laden Archive yield relevant insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy? To what extent can clusters and subsets of the Bin Laden Archive offer relevant insights on the phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism and the threat this poses to the West in general, and the Netherlands in particular?

Based on the results from Phase I, a set of topics was developed by the research team – in collaboration with WODC and the project SAC – for exploration during possible in-depth research on a selected cluster of the Archive. Ultimately, this research was not conducted over the course of this study. Table 12.2 provides an overview of these topics, and links them to relevant overarching project themes.

**Table 12.2 High-level themes and topics to be potentially investigated during possible in-depth research on a selected cluster of the Archive**

| Research strand |                       | Topic to be investigated                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.              | Ideology              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influence of different scholars and contemporary thinkers on Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                    |
| 2.              | Ideology              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Degree of coherence and cohesiveness of Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing approaches.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                              |
| 3.              | Ideology/<br>Strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al Qa'ida leadership's perception and analysis of contemporary geopolitical developments, conflicts and ensuing opportunities.</li> </ul>                                                                                    |
| 4.              | Strategy              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existence and content of an organisational medium- to long-term strategy. Degree of agency and reactivity influencing the design and adjustment of organisational strategies for medium- to long-term objectives.</li> </ul> |
| 5.              | Strategy              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al Qa'ida's prioritisation and decision-making mechanisms concerning targeting and operational/tactical approaches.</li> </ul>                                                                                               |
| 6.              | Strategy              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Configuration, use and role of training camps administered by Al Qa'ida Central following US invasion of Afghanistan.</li> </ul>                                                                                             |
| 7.              | Strategy              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Envisioned role of women within Al Qa'ida.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 8.              | Organisation          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al Qa'ida's relations and engagements with state authorities and security services in Pakistan, Iran and other relevant theatres of operation.</li> </ul>                                                                    |
| 9.              | Organisation          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drivers and factors influencing the decision making of different groups and organisations across the globe regarding official affiliation to Al Qa'ida's brand.</li> </ul>                                                   |
| 10.             | Organisation          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Degree of oversight, command and control exercised by Al Qa'ida Central on affiliate groups and their operational planning.</li> </ul>                                                                                       |
| 11.             | Organisation          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Degree and drivers of autonomy for command and control exercised by affiliate groups vis-à-vis Al Qa'ida Central.</li> </ul>                                                                                                 |

| Research strand  | Topic to be investigated                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12. Organisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al Qa'ida's decision-making approach to balancing global- and local-level strategic, operational and tactical issues.</li> </ul> |

A review of the results and findings emerging from Phase II of the study can help to assess the extent to which different clusters of the Archive might yield novel insights and findings on these. The next sections provide a summary of emerging findings on this matter.

### Image cluster

As discussed and evidenced in Chapter 7 of this report, there appears to be only a **limited potential for the image cluster of the Archive to help generate new knowledge and insights** on Al Qa'ida and on the related phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism. The sample analysis conducted does not suggest a significant potential for insights to be generated from images available in the Archive. Clustering images using their file size and types as heuristics to identify different types of content did not yield significant results or insights. The vast majority of images analysed in the Phase II sample appear to originate from news articles, websites, web caches and other public sources consulted by inhabitants of the Abbottabad compound with their devices. Two exceptions are worth highlighting.

First, within the image cluster, a subset of images appears to originate from devices in use in the Archive, or from individuals who then shared photos and images with the compound inhabitants. However, these images appear to be of limited relevance in the context of the study due to their focus primarily on children, animals and the spaces and landscapes in and around the compound, rather than on matters or topics connected to the study subject matter. Second, a number of handwritten and printed letters and documents appear as scans within the image cluster. However, a review of the letters and documents included in the sample did not yield significant novel insights relevant to the study. Nonetheless, scanned documents and letters appear to be the most promising content that could facilitate or generate novel insights on Al Qa'ida and the phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. Such letters could have the potential to offer insights on most, if not all, of the topics listed in Table 8.1, although the number and volume of such documents available in the image cluster are unclear.

### Audio cluster

As discussed and evidenced in Chapter 8 of this report, there appears to be only a **limited potential for the audio cluster of the Archive to help generate new knowledge and insights** on Al Qa'ida and on the related phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. The sample analysis conducted does not suggest a significant potential for insights to be generated from audios available in the Archive. None of the audios included in the Phase II sample appear to stem from private or non-public recordings and sources. Rather, a qualitative review of audio transcripts generated under the study indicates that the majority of audio files included in the Phase II sample focus on religious topics, although not predominantly from an extremist perspective. Recitations of the Qur'an, anasheed, lessons and sermons are particularly prevalent across all sample strata. More broadly, all of the recordings included in the study sample appear to be public and non-sensitive in their content; this also applies to a sizable proportion of randomly selected files excluded from the study sample due to the exclusion criteria. However, the sample-based approach taken to investigate the content of this

cluster does not enable us to completely exclude the possibility that relevant material might be available in the Archive.

### Video cluster

As discussed and evidenced in Chapter 9 of this report, there appears to be only a **limited potential for the video cluster of the Archive to help generate new knowledge and insights** on Al Qa'ida and on the related phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. The sample analysis conducted does not suggest a significant potential for insights to be generated from videos available in the Archive. The majority of video files included in Phase II samples focus on topics connected to religion and terrorism. This does not include, however, several videos that touch on topics or originate from sources that led to their exclusion from the study sample. In that regard, a wide array of television broadcasts, cartoons and other non-relevant materials were identified during the preparation of the study video samples. Only a small subset of videos included in the Phase II sample appear to stem from recordings and sources, but their relevance to the subject matter of focus is tenuous. Nonetheless, the sample-based approach taken to investigate the content of this cluster does not enable us to completely exclude the possibility that relevant material might be available in the Archive.

### Text cluster

A machine-enabled corpus linguistics analysis of the texts included in the Archive led to the identification of clear patterns within the available data. As discussed and evidenced in Chapter 10 of this report – as well as in Chapter 11 within the qualitative review of the so-called Bin Laden journal – the text cluster of the Archive appears to be **the most promising cluster that could help generate novel insights and knowledge about Al Qa'ida during possible follow-on research**. This is due to the cluster being comprised of personal, sensitive and private documents authored by individuals living in the Abbottabad compound, or by other Al Qa'ida senior personnel living in hiding who were in contact with those in the compound.

In particular, the RAND-Lex-enabled analysis of the Archive's text cluster led to the identification of four categories of content. First, a sizable segment of the text clusters was comprised of files that were edited by the CIA, as well as corrupt and unreadable files. Second, a number of text clusters identified in the Archive were comprised of newspaper copies, as well as copies of individual online articles and media publications from different periods of time. Third, a number of clusters identified in the text analysis were comprised of publications of different natures, covering religious themes and topics. This group of clusters includes both pedagogical materials, as well as publications covering advanced notions and topics within Islamic jurisprudence and theology. Fourth, a number of clusters that were identified comprised of documents covering issues related to *jihadism*, terrorism, extremism, politics and international affairs. Most interestingly, these clusters were comprised of public sources and documents downloaded from a wide range of websites and sources, but also documents that appear to be either of a confidential nature, or to have originated and been authored directly by occupants of the compound, or by individuals living in hiding who had been in contact with them.

With regard to the topics of the *influence of different scholars and contemporary thinkers on Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing* and the *degree of coherence and cohesiveness of Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing approaches*, the text cluster seems to comprise several thousand books, publications and documents touching on religious issues. While documents are unlikely to carry relevant annotations or comments that could be tied to any

Al Qa'ida member, their presence could provide relevant indications on the Al Qa'ida leadership's ideological inclinations. Further, the text cluster appears to contain several letters, documents and publications from within the organisation and from some of its members and cadres living in hiding, which could offer relevant insights on this matter.

The potential for private letters and documents included in the Archive to help generate novel insights also applies to other topics identified in Table 12.3. These include the *existence and content of an organisational medium- to long-term strategy*; the *degree of agency and reactivity influencing the design and adjustment of organisational strategies for medium- to long-term objectives*, as well as *Al Qa'ida's prioritisation and decision-making mechanisms concerning targeting and operational/tactical approaches*; the *envisioned role of women within Al Qa'ida*; and the *degree of oversight, command and control exercised by Al Qa'ida Central on affiliate groups and their operational planning*.

As for other topics identified in Table 12.3, it is worth noting that in the initial characterisation work conducted under Phase II and discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, it was possible to identify non-public letters, documents and sources that touch on the topics of *Al Qa'ida's leadership perception and analysis of contemporary geopolitical developments, conflicts, and ensuing opportunities*; *Al Qa'ida's relations and engagements with state authorities and security services in Pakistan, Iran and other relevant theatres of operation*; and *drivers and factors influencing decision making of different groups and organisations across the globe regarding official affiliation to Al Qa'ida's brand*.

### Cross-cutting links

Cross-cutting links between the different clusters can also be observed. For example, the text analysis demonstrated a number of links and areas of convergences between different parts of the Archive. In particular, some of the text files have shown areas of correlation with the material included in the journal, such as with regard to references to a speech in the journal, and indications of a speech found via the text cluster. Similar linkages can also be observed between the text, image and video clusters – for example with regard to material on religious matters, such as pilgrimage and Ramadan, within the text and video clusters, and similar style handwritten letters in the text and image clusters – suggesting that a holistic approach to analysing all parts of the Archive might uncover further linkages and connections that might otherwise be missed.

### Relevance to the Netherlands

Little to no materials were found that had a specific relevance or reference to the Netherlands. The material with a connection to the Netherlands includes an image of a former Member of the European Parliament – at a time at which she was still an MEP – captured from what appears to be a televised programme or interview, and a website banner with Dutch text about board games. Neither of these items were deemed to be of relevance.

Table 12.3 provides a succinct overview of the anticipated potential for different clusters and subsets of the Archive to help generate novel insights and knowledge during possible further research.

Table 12.3 Potential for new insights and findings concerning Al Qa'ida to stem from further analysis on discreet clusters of the Archive

|     | Research strand       | Topic to be investigated                                                                                                                                                                                          | Image cluster | Audio cluster | Video cluster | Text cluster |
|-----|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1.  | Ideology              | Influence of different scholars and contemporary thinkers on Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing.                                                                                                                    | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 2.  | Ideology              | Degree of coherence and cohesiveness of Al Qa'ida's ideology and framing approaches.                                                                                                                              | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 3.  | Ideology/<br>Strategy | Al Qa'ida leadership's perception and analysis of contemporary geopolitical developments, conflicts and ensuing opportunities.                                                                                    | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | High         |
| 4.  | Strategy              | Existence and content of an organisational medium- to long-term strategy. Degree of agency and reactivity influencing the design and adjustment of organisational strategies for medium- to long-term objectives. | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 5.  | Strategy              | Al Qa'ida's prioritisation and decision-making mechanisms concerning targeting and operational/tactical approaches.                                                                                               | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 6.  | Strategy              | Configuration, use and role of training camps administered by Al Qa'ida Central following US invasion of Afghanistan.                                                                                             | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 7.  | Strategy              | Envisioned role of women within Al Qa'ida.                                                                                                                                                                        | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 8.  | Organisation          | Al Qa'ida's relations and engagements with state authorities and security services in Pakistan, Iran and other relevant theatres of operation.                                                                    | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 9.  | Organisation          | Drivers and factors influencing decision making of different groups and organisations across the globe regarding official affiliation to Al Qa'ida's brand.                                                       | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 10. | Organisation          | Degree of oversight, command and control exercised by Al Qa'ida Central on affiliate groups and their operational planning.                                                                                       | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 11. | Organisation          | Degree and drivers of autonomy for command and control exercised by affiliate groups vis-à-vis Al Qa'ida Central.                                                                                                 | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |
| 12. | Organisation          | Al Qa'ida's decision-making approach to balancing global- and local-level strategic, operational and tactical issues.                                                                                             | Limited       | Limited       | Limited       | Medium       |





### 12.3. Reflections and recommendations on areas for further research

The scope of this study did not entail an in-depth research and analysis of any of the selected clusters included in the Archive. However, the research conducted during Phase II provided an indication of areas within the Archive that could merit further in-depth exploration and analysis.

Based on the findings gathered in the initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive, the study team believes that analysing selected clusters and subsets of the Archive could generate novel insights and knowledge through access to primary sources so far not considered in scholarly literature. In particular, the study team recommends prioritising an in-depth analysis of selected segments of the text cluster. While, as noted above, there is material of interest in other clusters (notably the handwritten letters within the image cluster, and certain elements of the video cluster), the overall proportion of potential material of interest within these clusters appears to be lower than that of the text cluster.

As evidenced in Chapter 10 of this document, by leveraging an approach grounded in machine-enabled corpus linguistics, the study team was able to characterise the overarching text cluster and identify subsets of documents more likely to generate relevant insights, based on the areas of focus for this study. Furthermore, and in light of possible time and resource constraints that need to be taken account when conducting future studies on the Bin Laden Archive, clustering the text files would enable researchers to prioritise files of interest, and conduct a more in-depth analysis of the most relevant files in an efficient and time-effective manner.



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## Annex A. Phase I methodology

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### A.1. Phase I: Production of the Al Qa'ida-related knowledge inventory

Phase I activities commenced with the production of an inventory of publicly available knowledge and research on Al Qa'ida and on the related phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism, as well as of publications and research (ongoing or completed) focusing on data contained in the so-called Bin Laden Archive.

#### A.1.1. Literature review

A targeted review of literature was conducted, focusing on academic and grey publications touching on Al Qa'ida and its ideology, strategy and organisation, as well as on the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism. The review covered more than 50 publications identified through a non-systematic research approach. In particular, the literature review built on the results of an initial non-systematic review effort conducted during the project preparation phase, which was expanded via a snowballing technique.<sup>464</sup> All of the sources reviewed were analysed and extracted using an inventory mapping tool and a literature extraction registry designed to facilitate subsequent analysis in Phase I and II of the study.

The purpose of the **inventory mapping tool** was to provide a high-level indication of the extent to which findings on different areas of investigation were available in each source reviewed, and whether they were based on primary or secondary sources. In contrast, the **literature extraction registry** presented a summary of findings and data included in the publications reviewed. The purpose of these instruments was not only to provide a structured method for conducting the review and analysis of literature sources under Phase I, but also to enable a streamlined comparison between state-of-the-art knowledge and any findings or insights emerging from later Phases of the project. Table A.4 and Table A.5 below provide an overview of the literature inventory mapping tool and literature extraction registry employed by the study team to extract data from publications reviewed. The populated inventory mapping tool and literature extraction registry were presented to WODC and the SAC as a separate addendum to the present report.

#### A.1.2. Systematic searches

The study team also conducted a set of targeted searches through multiple academic and grey literature databases to identify sources and publications that focused on or reviewed materials included in the Bin

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<sup>464</sup> I.e., a technique whereby, based on an initial set of key sources, additional studies and resources are identified through their citations.

Laden Archive. To this end, the study team employed a systematic research approach underpinned by the search strings included in Table A.1. Search strings presented in Table A.1 were run on each of the academic and grey literature repositories listed in Table A.2. Given the limited number of publications resulting from searches, the study team reviewed all of the results obtained to determine whether they should be included in broader literature review efforts and to assess, where relevant, the methods and approaches employed to analyse any data included in the Bin Laden Archive.

The review of publications to determine inclusion/exclusion was first conducted by title and by abstract. Publications to be included in the review comprised all those that used the Bin Laden Archive and/or data included in it (or in the so-called ‘Bin Laden Bookshelf’, an earlier, incomplete version of the Archive) as part of their work. In cases where it was not possible to determine whether a publication should be included by reviewing its title and abstract alone, the publication text was reviewed in full to determine its relevance to the study scope.

**Table A.1 Overview of search strings employed to identify publications touching on the Bin Laden Archive**

| First keyword / phrase                                                  | AND | Second keyword / phrase                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| *Qaeda OR *Qaida OR *Qa’eda OR<br>*Qa’ida OR “Bin Laden” OR “Bin Ladin” |     | “Abbottabad file*” OR “Abbottabad<br>archive*” OR “Bin Laden archive*” OR “Bin<br>Laden Bookshelf” OR “Bin Ladin archive*”<br>OR “Bin Ladin Bookshelf” |

**Table A.2 Databases and repositories searched to map publications touching on the Bin Laden Archive**

| Database       | Link                                                                                              |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| JSTOR          | <a href="https://www.jstor.org/">https://www.jstor.org/</a>                                       |
| Scopus         | <a href="https://www.elsevier.com/solutions/scopus">https://www.elsevier.com/solutions/scopus</a> |
| Google Scholar | <a href="https://scholar.google.co.uk/">https://scholar.google.co.uk/</a>                         |

**Table A.3 Overview of results by database and after review and filtering process**

| Database       | Publications retrieved |
|----------------|------------------------|
| JSTOR          | 2                      |
| Scopus         | 11                     |
| Google Scholar | 22                     |

Table A.4 Literature inventory mapping template

| Al Qa'ida               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Source                  | Ideology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Organisation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Strategy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Jihadi terrorism                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Internal organisation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Relations and interactions with other <i>jihadi</i> groups                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Strategy and long-term plans                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Operations and tactics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Recruitment and training                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| • Bibliographic details | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GREEN = Findings available and derived from primary sources and research</li><li>• AMBER = Findings available and derived from secondary sources and research</li><li>• RED = No relevant findings discussed</li></ul> |



Table A.5 Literature extraction registry

| Al Qa'ida                                                 |                              |                                                          |                                                          |                                                            |                                                          |                                                          |                                                          |                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Source and synopsis                                       | Methodology                  | Ideology                                                 | Organisation                                             |                                                            | Strategy                                                 |                                                          |                                                          | Jihadi terrorism                                         |
|                                                           |                              |                                                          | Internal organisation                                    | Relations and interactions with other <i>jihadi</i> groups | Strategy and long-term plans                             | Operations and tactics                                   | Recruitment and training                                 |                                                          |
| •Bibliographic details and publication synopsis/ abstract | •Please include a summary of | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2 | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2 | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2   | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2 | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2 | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2 | •Key finding summarised #1<br>•Key finding summarised #2 |

### A.1.3. Expert consultations and engagement

Following conclusion of the initial literature review efforts, the study team conducted stakeholder and expert consultation activities in the form of semi-structured interviews and email consultations. Interviews were conducted with four academic experts with a track record of work on Al Qa'ida and *Jihadi* terrorism more broadly. When selecting interviewees, the study team endeavoured to engage experts from both the Netherlands and abroad. The primary purpose of interviews was to:

- Elicit expert views as to which areas of inquiry related to Al Qa'ida are currently under-researched and/or subject to diverging views among scholars, and which could most benefit from being investigated through analysis of Bin Laden Archive data; and
- Elicit expert views and knowledge as to any ongoing or completed research and analysis efforts on the Bin Laden Archive.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the study team engaged over email with a number of experts to inquire as to their knowledge of any ongoing or completed research efforts conducted on the Bin Laden Archive and on its data. Annex A of this document provides further details concerning the expert consultations and engagement activities conducted.

### A.1.4. Analysis, reporting, validation and quality assurance

Upon conclusion of the literature review work and expert consultation activities, the data extracted from publications were analysed at an aggregate level alongside data collected during consultations. In particular, data collected under different sections of the literature extraction registry were examined with a view to identify recurring themes and debates within the literature regarding different aspects of Al Qa'ida, and particularly its ideology, strategy and organisations. Findings and results emerging from the analysis of literature extractions were compared and contrasted with data collected during expert consultations and engagements. Initial findings and recommendations stemming from Phase I were discussed through a series of internal study-team meetings, as well as during an internal validation workshop with RAND Europe subject matter experts. Finally, findings and recommendations reported in the Phase I summary report were subject to a peer review in accordance with RAND's quality assurance system, as well as to the review by the study's SAC members and by WODC.



## Annex B. Phase II methodology

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### B.1. Phase II: Initial assessment and characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive

Phase II activities sought to understand what materials are contained in the Archive and explore the extent to which they might be relevant to the subject matter of the study.

#### B.1.1. Image analysis

The image cluster of the Archive comprises over 70,000 image files. To characterise the cluster and investigate the potential for this to yield relevant new insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research, the study team conducted a human-based analysis of a non-randomised sample of the images included in the Archive. The analysis entailed a review of the images included in the sample and their categorisation according to a predetermined set of tags. In total, the study team analysed 1,500 images, accounting for approximately 2 per cent of the whole image cluster of the Archive.

While the use of machine-learning algorithms and other computer-powered analytic approaches was considered for this activity, the study team – in coordination with WODC and the project SAC – opted for a human-based approach to the analysis of this Archive cluster. In the context of the study, the project's resources and timeframe of operations, this enabled the study team to employ a greater volume of tags when analysing images than it would have otherwise been possible to do if employing an off-the-shelf computer-based categorisation system.

#### B.1.2. Audio analysis

The audio cluster of the Archive comprises approximately 11,000 audio files. To characterise the cluster and investigate the potential for this to yield relevant new insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research, the study team conducted both a human- and a machine-based analysis of transcripts of a stratified random sample of the audio files included in the Archive. Stratified random sampling is a method of sampling that involves the division of a population into smaller sub-groups, known as strata, based on items' shared attributes or characteristics.

In total, the study team analysed 15 hours of audio files. The files *analysed* account for approximately 0.5 per cent of the whole audio cluster, while the total number of audio files *sampled* account for approximately 1.5 per cent of the whole audio cluster. Audio file transcripts were transcribed through an external service provider. Transcripts were then subject to a qualitative, human-based analysis. Transcripts were also analysed as part of broader machine-enabled text analysis efforts discussed under Section B.1.4.

### B.1.3. Video analysis

The video cluster of the Archive comprises more than 10,000 video files. To characterise the cluster and investigate the potential for this to yield relevant new insights on Al Qa'ida's ideology, organisation and strategy through further research, the study team conducted both a human- and a machine-based analysis of transcripts of a stratified random sample of the video files included in the Archive.

In total, the study team analysed 15 hours of video files transcripts. The files analysed as part of the transcript analysis account for just under 1 per cent of the whole video cluster. The total number of video files sampled account for just over 2 per cent of the whole video cluster. Video files were transcribed through an external service provider. Transcripts were then subject to a qualitative human-based analysis. Transcripts were also analysed as part of broader machine-enabled corpus text analysis efforts,<sup>465</sup> which are discussed under Section B.1.4. Furthermore, in the case of the video cluster, the study team also conducted a qualitative review of a stratified random sample of 80 hours of videos from the Archive. The files *analysed* as part of the human-based analysis account for just over 2.5 per cent of the whole video cluster. The total number of video files *sampled* account for just over 5 per cent of the whole video cluster.

### B.1.4. Text analysis

The text cluster of the Archive comprises more than 42,000 files organised in two sub-clusters. First, the Archive comprises more than 18,000 texts saved as PDF and Microsoft Word files, which account for approximately 16 GB of data. Second, the Archive comprises a second cluster of more than 24,000 Microsoft Office files converted into PDF format, which account for approximately 12 GB of data.

To characterise and analyse the content of the Archive, the study team employed RAND-Lex. RAND-Lex is a proprietary suite of analytical tools developed by RAND researchers to perform rigorous and complex corpus text analytics. RAND-Lex is a holistic approach to text analysis that utilises built-in statistical testing and machine-learning modules that can use pragmatic language features, in addition to semantic features. RAND-Lex has been used in a variety of research projects to analyse large text collections using scalable analytic capabilities.<sup>466</sup>

In the context of Phase II activities, the study team employed RAND-Lex's auto-clustering module. This is an unsupervised machine-learning module that enables users to discover possible classes of text objects by word or stance similarity. Unlike classification, in clustering there is no ground truth or measures of accuracy or recall. Instead, clustering should be seen in dichotomous terms as useful vs less useful, or insight producing vs not illuminating. Clustering is thus an exploratory method that can be a helpful first step towards building a classifier model.

### B.1.5. Bin Laden journal analysis

The so-called 'Bin Laden journal' is a handwritten journal included in the Archive that was reportedly written by Osama Bin Laden and other occupants of the Abbottabad Compound. The journal is available in the Archive as a scanned, handwritten document.

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<sup>465</sup> In linguistics, a corpus or text corpus is a language resource consisting of a large and structured set of texts.

<sup>466</sup> Bodine-Baron et al. (2016); Helmus et al. (2018); Marcellino et al. (2020).

Over the course of Phase II, the journal was transcribed through an external service provider and was then subject to both a human- and a machine-based analysis. First, the journal transcript was reviewed as a standalone document by the study team. Second, the journal transcript was included in the corpus of texts analysed through RAND-Lex (see Section B.1.4).



## Annex C. Stakeholder elicitation details and tools

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### C.1. Interviewees list

Table C.1 Interviewees list

| ID | Name                | Institution                                            |
|----|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Joas Wagemakers     | University of Utrecht                                  |
| 2  | Pieter Van Ostaeyen | International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague |
| 3  | Lorenzo Vidino      | George Washington University                           |
| 4  | Anonymous           | Anonymous                                              |



## C.2. Stakeholder interview protocol

### Introduction

- Introduction to self and RAND Europe
- RAND Europe has been commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security to:
  - ‘conduct a study to generate insights into the extent to which the so-called Bin Laden Archive (Abbottabad Compound Material) provides new information about the ideology, organisation, and strategy of Al Qa’ida; and about the broader phenomenon of *Jihadi* terrorism and the threat that this poses for the West in general and the Netherlands in particular’.
- Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?
  - *Make sure interviewee has a copy of the study information sheet and has completed a consent form*

### About interviewee

- *[If not academic interviewee]* Please could you tell us about your organisation, its work and your current roles and responsibilities?

### Interview Questions

*The interview should focus broadly on the following areas:*

- *Eliciting expert views as to which areas of inquiry related to Al Qa’ida are currently under-researched and/or subject to diverging views among scholars, and which could most benefit from being investigated through analysis of Archive data; and*
  - *Eliciting expert views and knowledge as to any ongoing or completed research and analysis efforts on the so-called Bin Laden Archive.*
1. Please could you tell us about your background and previous experience with regard research and work on *Jihadi* terrorism in general and Al Qa’ida in particular?
  2. With regard to existing research and knowledge about Al Qa’ida, could you tell us what aspects of this organisation you consider to be under-researched or subject to diverging views among scholars?
    - a. Ideology  
*[Prompts: doctrinal precepts; ideological influences; scholars]*
    - b. Organisation  
*[Prompts: internal organisation; core-affiliates relations; core-periphery management; relations with regional states/security services; Syria; Yemen; Iraq; Libya; evolution and adaptation]*
    - c. Strategy  
*[Prompts: long-term objectives; near/far enemy; operational and tactical approaches; logistics; financing; recruitment and training; target demographics]*

d. Other *jihadi* terrorist groups

*[Prompts: rivalries and competition; relations with non-affiliated groups]*

3. Are you aware of any ongoing or completed research and analysis efforts conducted on the Bin Laden Archive and its data?

- *[Prompts for interviewee with awareness of ongoing or past research activities]*

*What methods and approaches were used/are being used?*

*Could you please introduce us to the Principal Investigator and/or organisation that conducted/is conducting this work?*

*Could you please share any resulting publications or insights stemming from the work conducted?*

### C.3. Stakeholder interview consent form

Participant Consent Form – RAND Europe Project 19035 – WODC Project 2995 – 10/04/2019



## Participant Consent Form

### Insights from the Bin Laden Archive

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. ☐
2. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until the point where my data can reasonably be extracted without giving any reason. ☐
4. I agree to participate in the above study. ☐
5. I understand that I may request to clarify or withdraw any statements made during the course of the interview. ☐
6. My preference regarding how my data is attributed in the report and any resulting publications:
  - a. Full attribution: I agree to be named and quoted in the report for the client and in any resulting publications. ☐
  - b. Partial anonymity: I only agree for my organisational affiliation (role, organisation) to be associated with my quotes. The following details may be used: ☐
  - c. Full anonymity: I consent to my data being used anonymously. I do not agree to be named or for my organisational affiliation to be included in reporting resulting from the research. ☐
7. I consent to my interview being audio recorded. ☐

**Name of participant** (PLEASE PRINT)      **Date** (add date)      **Signature** (add signature)

For more information on this study or about RAND Europe, please contact Dr. Giacomo PERSI PAOLI (Associate Director, RAND Europe - [gpersipa@rand.org](mailto:gpersipa@rand.org)) or Mr. Jacopo BELLASIO (Senior Analyst, RAND Europe - [bellasio@rand.org](mailto:bellasio@rand.org))